



AN INTERRACIAL ROMANCE

*A*  
**PLANTATION**  
*Scandal*

ASPEN BERRY

A Plantation Scandal  
An Interracial Romance

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## **A Plantation Scandal: An Interracial Romance**

By Aspen Berry

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Warning: This book contains graphic language and sexual content.

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From the Author

Also by Aspen Berry

## A Plantation Scandal

An escaped slave and the betrothed of a pro-slavery congressman.

Two powerful families coming together, it was a match intended to rejuvenate the South and propel him to the presidency.

However, when Leon, a former slave escapes and finds his way back to Evergreen, an old debt compels Josie to harbor him in secret.

But with her wedding approaching, can the beautiful heiress fight her increasing desires for the troubled fugitive?

Obsessed overseers, a militia on the lookout and an injured fiancé on the warpath - If only keeping her liaisons secret was Josie's only concern.

## Chapter 1

Joséphine

October, 1851

Papa's arm moves protectively across my front. "Whoa there, Josie, why don't you settle back, else you'll fall out the darned carriage."

I grin and shake my head but settle back regardless. "I can't help it, Papa."

Because N'Orleans hustles with life; horses happily tugging carriages, merchants lining the boulevards selling an infinite quantity of wares shipped from all over the world, ladies of fashion walking their little dogs, sometimes with a black face idling close to shield the sun with an umbrella, the Great Star flag fluttering from near every building and now easily overwhelming the French Tricolors that have remained ever since the Louisiana Purchase, parties of slaves jumping into wagons, the distinctive pretty buzzes of trumpets that forever lingers on every corner and one of those beautiful stern-paddle wheel boats berthing as long lines of black faces wait to board.

Indeed, Papa's not brought me to the city in so long and it's even more spectacular than I remember, but I'm a woman now, or rather I will be next week when I turn eighteen, and so this is Papa's way of introducing me to society gradually. To think that soon I'll be attending balls, proms, dinners, in the hope of meeting a suitable match, I can barely even contain my excitement. Life is wonderful.

"I needed a son but God gave me you instead," Papa had again reminded me this morning in the stern way he always does, though

not without a hint of joviality, “and because I’ve no son to inherit the plantation, you’ll have to fetch me one instead.” He’d inspected me as I waited for him on the porch and had puckered his lips in approval.

“Just so long as he’s handsome, Papa.” Every girl dreams of a lavish wedding to her beau, whoever he’ll be. Evergreen often hosts visitors, all kinds of interesting people; merchants, bankers, slavers, lawyers, accountants, and many neighboring planters, though other than the occasional brief introduction, I’ve always been kept well away from such lofty affairs of business, and of potential suitors. I suspect Papa likes teasing the menfolk, to dangle me in front of their eyes before sending me back to the tutor for French, Latin, or piano...

Oliver swerves suddenly owing to their being a jittery horse on the road in front but he’s a good driver and quickly regains control.

“Well salvaged,” Papa calls out front and Oliver twists around in his seat to nod at him before bringing his eyes back to the road, though not without first casting his usual deliberate glance over me.

Oliver’s our head overseer and has on no fewer than three separate occasions asked Papa for my hand, the last time he’d even caused something of a spectacle, breaking down upon once again being refused.

“You have got to be joking,” Papa had scrunched up his nose in a way that made his broken blood vessels flare, “if I said no to that railroad tycoon, I’m hardly likely to agree to my one and only child marrying my slave driver.”

Later that same evening, Papa had come to me in the music room. I’d just finished playing a piece by Mozart and he’d clapped as he crossed the floor. “My...my...my, ain’t you my little meal ticket.” It was his usual joke, which he said mussing my hair before sitting beside me on the stool.

I placed my hands in my lap and twisted around to face him. “You wouldn’t make me marry Oli, would you, Papa?”

He raised one eyebrow into a bemused expression. “You don’t like him, huh? Even after he saved your life?”

I shook my head. “I don’t like the way he treats the slaves, and he’s especially mean to Jasper.”

A blast of air shot from Papa’s nose. “Just doing his job, is all, but don’t you worry about him, he’s been told, and this time he believes it.”

I threw my arms around him and had once again envisioned my beau, tall, strong and especially gentle, though as usual no other particulars were detailed on that vague and hazy canvas.

He brought me to arms' length and his expression had turned serious. "God might not have gifted me with a son but he sure as all heck *did* gift me with the most beautiful daughter a man could have asked for, which means it won't be long 'till one of these offers is good enough for my girl."

*And for you too*, I'd thought, before commencing with, at Papa's request, Piano Sonata No. 11.

Now, Oliver slows the carriage to a stop. Papa jumps off and our head overseer is quick to do likewise before dashing around to my side and holding out his hand.

"Miss Josie..." his eyes have that usual leering look, which I accept he probably can't help whenever I'm around, but it's unnerving all the same. In any case, I give him my hand and use the other to raise my skirts as I descend the step. I'm half expecting him to again fall down on one knee, or maybe even both, right here in the heart of N'Orleans in front of Papa and a hundred spectators, and I'm awful apprehensive as I strike turf but mercifully he merely ogles my exposed neck in my flower-patterned summer dress.

I smile half-heartedly, but maybe that's too much, "thank you, Oliver," and glance up at the building before reading the elaborate sign above the grand doorway. "Auction House." It's not quite where I'd hoped to begin my life in society, but it's not like I have any say in the matter, or much else besides.

Papa joins my side, links his elbow inside of mine and together we ascend the steps. Inside, we're greeted by a smartly dressed young man with long red hair tied back into a bun. "Good afternoon, Mis...Mister Broussard," he seems conflicted between staring at me and showing the obligatory esteem to Papa, but he manages to tear his gaze from my exposed darned neck flesh for long enough to shake his hand. "What can I do for you today, sir?"

Papa casts a prideful sideward glance in my direction and takes it in his stride. "I need a new nigger. Preferably something young, *lithe*, and that won't keel over halfway through an arduous day."

The man nods. "Expecting a good harvest, are we, Mister Broussard?"

"As always." Papa glances beyond him towards a large white-washed room from where various murmurs of activity are drifting



over. "What say you, man, am I wasting my time?"

The man grins, his eyes flicking again over me, and gestures within. "Follow me, sir. We've a fresh boatload delivered this week from the Gold Coast," he begins as he leads the way, "some *lithe* ones there, lots of energy, you can be assured..."

"The last slave I bought from the Gold Coast, some Ashanti nigger or whatnot, took a whole three months to break." Papa wraps a gloved hand around the man's shoulder, prompting him to stop. "Now that's the kind of lost productivity that can make or break my harvest."

The man half bows in acknowledgment. "Mister Broussard, let me assure you our latest batch has already been sufficiently whipped into compliance."

Papa nods. "Let's hope so, else you'll be hearing from my lawyers." It's all bluster, or so I assume, Papa has always hated lawyers.

We enter just as the fiddles commence from the far wall, a trio of dark-skinned musicians trilling pretty sounds. We aren't the only buyers here, though I'm the only white lady present, and my attention is drawn to one conspicuous gentleman in top hat with a duo of helpers and a train of slaves following as he circles the room. The human wares, naked from the chest up, are arranged in three ranks of maybe ten apiece and the red-haired man now leads us athwart the front for inspection. Another two ranks are arranged likewise at a right angle to the three. A man from the auction house steps between the dark-skinned men spraying perfume from a bottle, though mostly he's losing the battle to overwhelm the smell coming from the fifty slaves arranged for our inspection.

"See this one here," our helper selects a young teenager and claps him so hard on the shoulder that the slap rings out through the room, "suitably broken, see? Hop on one leg," he commands, from when the prospect does as he's bid. "You ever see a nigger that's not broke degrade himself so? That's enough. Now bark like a dog..."

"That won't be necessary," Papa cuts in whilst rubbing his chin, "I know a broken nigger when I see one." He circles the prospect, squeezes his arms, shoulders, and slaps his buttocks. "Definitely *lithe*. Sprightly young nigger. Endurance is what I need, see?" Papa tugs out the slave's bottom lip to inspect his teeth as he continues staring submissively forward. "Healthy. How much?"

"The price for Thomas is six hundred dollars, Mister Broussard."

"What? For an inexperienced field hand?" Papa shakes his head. "I'll pay half that." They go on haggling, mens' business, whilst my attention wanders about the room. I'm used to seeing half-naked and muscular dark bodies laboring about Evergreen so I'm scarcely scandalized or flustered around so many of the same now and certainly, Papa's hardly concerned any more than he would be with my being in the presence of a bull or a horse. The buyer in the top hat continues to inspect the merchandise from the other side and my gaze shifts lazily to the third wall where a line of ten or twelve women wait quietly, their breasts on full display. It's now that my attention is wrenched back to where the man in the top hat has stopped.

"My word, what have you been feeding this one?"

"Dunno."

"You don't know?"

"The former owner sold up and went west so he's no longer around to ask."

I barely hear the words because I'm presently undergoing one of those strange, surreal moments when time stops and the room around you begins to spin. What's more, the black face is averted from the two men ogling him and is instead grinning fully at me. My mind descends further into a daze of the most lucid kind as I'm taken back to the age of eight. I'm on the edge of our plantation running through the stream chasing butterflies when suddenly I slip on a rock, fall back, and crack my head on a stone. The water's moments away from drowning me as I float face down and unconscious. I only come to as I'm being carried out in the arms of one of the slave boys I vaguely know, and then I'm laid down on the grass before throwing up a lungful of water and thanking the Lord I'm saved.

"Thank you," I gasp as the young slave shivers and stares wide-eyed over at the stream.

"Guess I'm not so scared of tha water no more." It's so astonishing that we both descend into fits of hysterics until Oliver, at this time an apprentice overseer in his late teens, appears as if from nowhere.

He grabs the black boy, who's a couple of years older than me, and pitches him away from the white child before threatening, "no mention of this, boy, if anyone asks, and if they do, you say it was

me what saved Josie, you understand, you dumb fucking nigger? That's right, I'm glad you hear me, now run along." Then Oliver turns to me. "Miss Joséphine, you know the old man don't like you diverting with the niggers. You could of been drowned." He shakes his head as his face softens. "And you know I was right behind anyways, waiting to heave you outta that water by my own."

"Of course," I say before starting back for home.

Oliver calls out to my back, "now don't you let me catch you around him no more."

Naturally, I hadn't listened, and the next thing I know I'm balling my eyes out as what would become my closest, perhaps only, friend in the world is being sold to a man with a powdered wig and a French accent.

Oliver emerges suddenly from behind my shoulder. "The slowest darned picker of sugarcane you ever did see. Glad Mister Broussard heeded my counsel. No, we can all be glad that nigger's not our problem no more."

A few moments later, my friend's being taken away in the back of a cart, never to be seen again...

Until now.

But it can't be...

Oh, but then why is he grinning at me so?

"My word, there's always a job for a buck this size. How much?" The man takes a step away so he can fully behold the slave before him, craning his neck and unsettling his black top hat as he does.

The assistant slaps the slave hard on the chest, the dense black musculature from which makes a dull thud that resounds over the sound of the fiddles. "For Cumberland, one thousand dollars."

"What?"

"Mister Boudreaux, let me assure you that with this one slave you'll be able to replace all your oxen, and he's just as docile. Hey, eyes front."

'Cumberland' does as he's told, at least with regards those dark, brooding eyes, though he can't quite so easily remove that devilish smirk. I'm only now beginning to regain clarity of thought. Cumberland? Hmm, he must have been given a new name.

"Oxen? Docile?" The top hat rubs his chin. "Now you're giving me ideas. Maybe we can find something unique for a stud like this - good Lord, the shoulders on the brute - ok then, one thousand dollars it is, you've got yourself a deal." The top hat turns back to

Cumberland. "Now wipe that silly smirk off your face and go fetch yourself a scrubbing brush. I want you scoured raw before you set foot near my plantation."

"Leon?" I hear myself saying and immediately my childhood friend twists back to face me, taking an unconscious step forward as he does and unsettling everybody around him.

"Hello, Miss Joséphine," he says in a voice so deep and velvety that it further unsettles the top hat, both assistants and several prospects in the periphery, not that I notice that as I now have confirmation he is who I'd thought, though I'm not sure how I could ever have doubted my instincts, as Leon still possesses that same always-present and infectious smile. And Lord, how he's grown.

"I remember when you were taken," I feel the tears pricking at my eyes, I've never again allowed myself to get so close to another slave, "where ... how have you been?"

Leon's about to answer but the top hat, um, Mister Boudreaux, I guess, steps between us. "Excuse me, miss, but this is a matter of business conducted by men, now, why don't you be about yours..."

Leon's head still pokes out above the top hat, which is saying something. "Oh, you know, Miss Joséphine, just pickin' tha cotton over at Rosedown. 'till Massa Guidry sell up, anyways..."

"Yes, cotton," Boudreaux interjects, "but for you, young man, I have something in mind rather more pertinent to your talents. Why, from tomorrow you'll be prizefighting in the pits of N'Orleans." Cumberland, um, Leon, doesn't flinch but I recoil in horror at the atrocious words.

"The fighting pits?" I screech, causing Papa to stir from where he's still conducting business. "You can't do that, not to Leon, he's my friend."

The two men laugh at that and now I can feel myself beginning to shake. "See all my purchases delivered by noon tomorrow," Boudreaux says with finality and again I'm unable to control my reaction, only this time I'm reaching forwards and seizing my old friend by the arm. It's hot and sticky but otherwise feels enormous and hard not unlike the hind leg of a bull.

"No!" I yelp.

Papa dashes into my periphery and rapidly switches his gaze between me, Leon, Boudreaux and his auction house helper. After adjusting and weighing up the situation, Papa shakes his head, softens his expression towards me and then gives the other two a

bemused look. "Gentlemen, I apologize for my daughter. The female race ... what can I say?"

Boudreaux bows to my papa, gentleman to gentleman. "I have daughters of my own, sir, so I can only sympathize, alas, what we would not do for them..." his eyes squint some, "although bringing one to an auction house?" He shifts his weight to the other boot. "Can't say I see the use involving the simple dears in matters of business, that's why we have sons, no?"

Papa's lips scrunch in the way they do when he's irritated but he decides not to mention I'm an only child. "Gentlemen, once again, excuse my daughter, she means no fowl." He turns and begins to pull me away but I tug him back, my other hand still clinging to Leon as though his life depends on it. "What is it, Josie?"

I'm lost. Completely lost. "Papa, you remember my friend Leon?"

"Who?"

"Leon!" I yank on Leon's arm just in case there's any doubting who I'm talking about.

"Hullo, Massa Broos," Leon's voice seizes Papa's attention, how could it not, from when Papa studies Leon's face and shrugs, but then after a further few seconds the recognition slowly emerges.

"Oh, that one, lazy and always hungry, if I recall," he sniffs, "look, Josie, come along, I've purchased the nigger we came for and now we have to get back..."

"Friends with the niggers?" Boudreaux snorts. "Just get her a dog and be done with it."

Papa ignores the top hat, even though he's finding it increasingly difficult. He again tugs my hand but my other's threaded so tightly in the crook of Leon's elbow, who's likewise rooted so surely to the ground, that the only way I'm moving is if my friend comes along too. I gasp...

*Comes too?*

Why hadn't I thought of that before?

I cry the words. "Papa, why don't you buy Leon?"

That causes a stir from everybody present, including some of the other slaves who've been paying increasingly more attention to the scene I've caused, heck, even Leon's shaking his head.

"It's ok, Miss Joséphine, I be going to a good home, you can be sure about that." The fighting pits, the fighting pits! *Oh, Leon, you brave soul.*

I'm pleading now, "Papa?"

He sniffs again and recoils. "You must be joking, surely, he'll cost half my harvest in victuals alone."

My brain scours for something convincing, anything to make him change his mind. "But Papa, um, Leon already knows how to pick the sugarcane," I blurt the words but it makes obvious sense, "and he'll be faster now that he's a fully grown man."

Papa's eyes pass over Leon's chest, shoulders and arms, muscular like a circus strongman, causing his eyes to widen. "What, with all that bulk weighing him down?" He shakes his head and the room begins to spin again. I'm losing, not that I was ever in with a shot to save poor Leon. This is a man's world, after all, a white man's world. "Damn it, Josie, I came for something lithe, *lithe*, remember, and I got my nigger already. Now, will you stop causing a fuss." He turns to his red-haired helper and snaps his fingers. "The nigger Thomas. Get to it, would you." Papa makes to move but he stops suddenly as his eyes momentarily glaze over. He's staring at the females. "Hmm, maybe we can spare a few more minutes."



All the way home, I wept, and I irritated Papa so much that eventually he threatened to put me in the back along with Thomas and Polly. He didn't, though, despite the fact I continued crying regardless. How could I not? That by the grace of God, I'd found Leon again, only to once more have him taken away from me.

The fighting pits!

Oh, how awful.

No slave deserves that, to spend a life being beaten bloody. Leon might have grown to be a huge man but that doesn't mean he's the sort who'd take pleasure in beating others for no reason other than to amuse their masters and fill their pockets. No, there was no mistaking that infectious smile, and that even after everything, a life of toil and drudgery, of being passed from one master to another, he never lost it. He's still as gentle now as he was back then.

*Remember the good times, Josie*, noodling in the stream, watching the fish jump clean out our hands and then laughing so hard that it hurt.

It's late when we arrive back at Evergreen and Papa tells Oliver

to show Thomas to the slave quarters. Polly sets off with them but Papa yells at her to stay right where she is because she's wanted inside the house, although he doesn't say what for.

She's a taller negress, not quite so dark as some of the other maids, and she definitely has less on the buttocks. That's one thing I've noticed about the womenfolk, they nearly all possess an abundance down there, but Polly's quite slender by comparison, almost like myself, and with similar shaped breasts, small and pert. Papa had seemed embarrassed to be looking in front of me and was quick to demand she be clothed. I guess now he wants her to cook and clean, or something.

## Chapter 2

Joséphine

**M**y birthday comes and goes, eighteen years of age which, I guess, means I'm a woman grown now. Papa threw a ball in the Evergreen music room and we had dances, music and lots of fine food of the type I'm told you can usually only eat in the mother country. The maids were given special outfits for the occasion and even some of the less coarse-looking male slaves were permitted attendance, given formal wear and told to carry out server duties. It was a big deal, intended as my formal introduction to society, and I was astonished by the sheer quantity of offers I received for marriage. Of course, when I say 'I' received, what I truly mean is that Papa received the offers on my behalf.

"Josie," he'd slurred my name once everybody had left in their carriages and made a gesture for me to approach from where he slumped low in the divan, "come sit. You make me so proud." He reeked of spirit but I obeyed.

"Papa."

"You're the picture of your mother, God rest her sweet soul, and I remember the day like it's only yesterday when I asked *her* father for her hand in marriage." He kicked off his boots and snapped his fingers, and then Polly came dashing over to rub his feet. "Awe, yeah, now that's what I'm talking about. Anyway, I was so nervous, she was the most beautiful girl in all Louisiana, so why wouldn't I be, and there were other men who'd asked, obviously, one of whom was some mining magnate with more dollars than you could ever hope to count, but in the end it was *I* who he agreed to let marry his only daughter." He stared at me with intent. "You know why?"



Of course, I already knew this story so well. "Because she already loved you, Papa."

"That's right, she already loved me, because I'd read her father well and so I made the effort to charm the girl in the meantime. All my efforts paid off, you see? That's the spot, dear, a little deeper with them thumbs now. And because of that, Josie, the idiot died drunk and penniless in a ditch somewhere out on the road to Lafayette."

My head jerked back as this was a part of the story I'd never been told. "You ... you never speak of my grandpa, Papa."

"And now you know why. An embarrassment. But you'll not catch me making the same mistake. No. He could have gone with the mining bigshot and lived out his life in luxury but no, to an old fool like that, love trumps security, and he put his daughter's happiness before his own shirt." He barked and shook his head. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I'm thankful, ever so thankful, it all worked out so well for me, but I'm not too certain such a fact was a comfort to him when he was lying face down and gasping for air in a big pile of steaming horse shit."

I swallowed. "Does this mean you've accepted one of the offers, Papa?"

That had made him sit up and his expression became even more serious. "You know, tonight you received an offer from no less than a full general in the United States military."

My heart contracted in a way that was quite painful. A military man? I'd always assumed those sorts to be far too serious. No fun at all. "Right?"

"And a lumberyard proprietor, shipwright, another banker and several more plantation owners, and I said no to all of them." He grinned wide with pride and patted me on the buttocks. "But don't worry, sweet little thing, after tonight, word is sure to get out about your beauty, not to mention your skills on the old ivories. Soon as something suitable comes along, you may accept."

I nodded and yawned profoundly. "Yes, Papa. Might I retire now?"

"Just one more thing," he'd held out his hand to keep me in situ. "Now that you've come of age, it's no longer appropriate for you to be seen out in the fields conversing with the niggers..."

"But Papa..."

"No more reading to the children, chasing the niglets around the

cabins or nursing the babes, you understand me?" He leaned forwards and never did I see him looking or sounding so stern. "It's not the done thing, Josie, you a woman grown now, a lady, and a lady must be seen to be above discoursing with the slaves, especially if she's to attract a gentleman of means, but most important of all, no matter how slim it might be, there'll always be a chance that one of the niggers might see you in your skirts and forget hisself." His words had forced a gasp from me, even though I could not be too sure I knew of what he was even referring. "You're a beautiful lady, pale-skinned with pretty blonde hair, nothing of the like a nigger has ever seen and sure, they may seem domesticated, even broken, for the most part, but believe me when I say it, that no matter how many times you care to whip a nigger, you can never quite whip the jungle completely outta him. Don't forget, it's only two plantations over that LeBlanc's daughter was..." he'd shut his eyes and yanked his foot almost violently away from Polly, and had only finished what he wanted to say after several seconds of nervous respite, "you may now retire, my sweet."

## Chapter 3

Joséphine

**I**t might have been my imagination, but it seemed like ever since my introduction ball, there was an increase in visitors to Evergreen. In the proceeding weeks, nearly every day, I was called to Papa's study to be introduced to all kinds of people; doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and at least one member of the distinguished Vanderbilts who'd made his second request of my father. This, it seemed, he was pondering on, that was until a Belgian prince arrived, who upon meeting me fell immediately to his knees. Both of them.

"Oh, sir, you do embarrass me, I'm not worthy of such praise." Indeed, I was positively flushing, for whatever reason a great many of these men seem to lose all sense of dignity in my presence.

He'd leaped up and grabbed my hand before slavering my knuckles with saliva. I tried to retract, after all, I don't wish to get pregnant before we've even had chance to take tea, but his grip was so very keen. Mercifully, Papa's looming presence was sufficient to dissuade the prince from further indecency.

"Please, your royal highness," Papa stroked the stubble upon his chin, "you must allow Miss Joséphine to sleep on your offer."

When he left, I feared Papa would break the appalling news at once, that we were to be wed, but instead he merely deigned to chastise me for playing jump rope with Jasper and Cornelius, forgetting the prince entirely. He'd moved around the back of his desk before stopping ominously beside his cat o' nine tails encased within its glass cabinet, and casually placing his elbow upon it. "Please, my sweet Josie, don't make me have to tell you again."

Now, it's three evenings later when Polly finds me amongst the slaves, bouncing Luther on my knee, a little black bundle of joy if ever there was one.

"Please, Miss Jos'phine, Massa Broos wants to sees you now. Up in the house. Says it's urgent." The new maid's sweating in the heat and the dash out here from the house must have caused her garters to slip down. Her top button's also undone, exposing just the slightest hint of black crevice from between her breasts. Papa would not approve.

"Oh, I..." I stand with a start, my heart thumping, and instinctively squint towards the house for the looming silhouette of Papa. Mercifully, he's not there.

Polly places her hand on my sleeve. "No worry, Miss Jos'phine, I won't say nothin' of what'cha doin'."

I take a relieving breath. "Thank you."

I'm quick to make my way to the house, and through the hall and dining room, but I can't help but slow as I approach the study's opened door making visible one of Papa's boots crossed over the other, then comes his imposing desk of black walnut, his dogs, the back of another chair with a blond head beneath hat rising above the top of the backrest with a plume of dirty brown smoke drifting up and filling the study before wafting into the dining room, someone clears his throat, someone who's not my papa, and then there's the creaking of floorboards as the stranger rises to face me just as I cross the threshold.

I stop, the man twists around on two knee-high leather boots with silver buckles, his breeches, suit and jacket, which he fills well, are expertly tailored with gold trim, and the stick he holds likewise possesses a gold pommel encrusted with precious stones. Upon first sight of me, his eyes widen, and his sudden intake of air causes the end of his cheroot to blaze furiously from when he struggles to contain his cough but ultimately loses the battle, and he spends the next several seconds wheezing into a kerchief hastily tugged from an inside pocket.

Well, this is new.

I stand back and wait politely for the episode to conclude whilst trying not to choke on the foul-smelling smoke myself. Finally, the man, whoever he is, recovers, wipes at his forehead and with a trembling hand reaches up to remove his hat, which has somehow managed to remain in place throughout the whole unfortunate

ordeal. He nods.

"Perhaps, congressman," Papa's tone is restrained, "you'd best stub out that cheroot before you do yourself a mischief."

*Congressman? Well, this, at least, is something else that's new.*

The stranger takes Papa's advice, stubbing it out on the desk and turning back to me. "Miss, it's my pleasure to meet your acquaintance." The man's not unattractive, far from it, in fact, his deep blue eyes are shrewd, his nose long and straight, and incredibly, even his teeth are all present and in place, if a little brown-stained. His jaw is masculine and partly covered by a thin beard that suits his face and blends well into his wavy blond hair and drooping mustache. He now manages to pull his eyes from me to glance at Papa for the expected formal introduction.

Papa, who's been sitting back with a glass of bourbon enjoying the stranger's reaction, finally stands, puffing out his chest as he does. "Congressman Harper, I'd like to introduce to you my beautiful daughter, Miss Joséphine Broussard."

The man in question forgets himself and nods again, though this time it's slightly more of a bow. "Miss Joséphine, the rumors of your beauty do not do you near enough credit."

Oh, that's one I've heard before, recently, in fact, but I feign ignorance and step closer, holding out my hand. "The pleasure's all mine, sir, I can assure you." I sound almost convincing, though this congressman, whatever he said his name is, might not be half as awful as some of the others, which is truly saying something. I sigh inwardly, perhaps, one day, I might even learn to love him. I mean, it's possible. Besides, what choice do I have, other than to make the most of a bad situation. I'm a woman, after all, and most often this is our lot in life. Sometimes we just have to grit our teeth and get on with it. I'm lucky in many ways. Yes, *that* I must always remember. I realize that I might sound certain this, Congressman *Harper*, is the man Papa will make me marry. Yes, indeed, I think I knew it before I even arrived. Something about Polly's tone, the time of day I was called in, the smoke, bourbon, Papa's mood and the way he made the introductions, not to mention the congressman himself. I also know my papa, and that owning one of the largest and most successful sugarcane plantations in all Louisiana isn't anywhere near enough for him, that he wants more. More, more, more. Most of all, it's the feeling I have, that I'm about to be taken away from my home to live in some strange place with a strange

man I know absolutely nothing yet about.

“Mister Broussard,” the congressman says, his eyes ever upon mine, “might I ask Miss Joséphine for a few moments of her company?”

My eyes flick to Papa, who nods his approval.

“You may take the liberty of our opulent plantation, sir, and Master Oliver will be pleased to accompany you both.” At Papa’s words, Oliver’s shadow appears from the other side of the doorway, along with the ominous shape of a rifle slung over one shoulder.

The congressman bows to Papa, “sir, it will be my pleasure,” and if he feels irked to be chaperoned, the politician knows not to show it.

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“Please, miss, you must excuse my slight folly back then.” He thumps his chest with the inside of a closed fist. “It’s not the way I always envisioned meeting my future...” his face clamps momentarily, “I mean, I really ought to give up those dreaded lung darts, alas, it’s an affliction I’m finding difficult to part with.”

“We all have our vices, sir, you can be sure.”

He turns inwardly towards me and I feel his eyes burning through my skirts. “Oh? Lady like you, I find that hard to believe. Care to elucidate?”

*I play with the niggers, which apparently is a crime these days.* “I’ve a strong penchant for lemon drizzle cake, sir.” I stare blankly ahead into the endless ocean of sugarcane looming high over our heads. “A consequence of forever being surrounded by the stuff, I fear.”

He laughs and moves to place his arm around my shoulder before remembering himself and quickly suppressing his urges. From seven or eight paces behind, Oliver clears his throat, making his presence known, as we continue strolling through the crop that agitates just barely by the breeze. I know I’m not being very talkative but I just can’t bring myself to be enthusiastic about such a potential union, best I might be able to hope for as almost certainly he is. Again, it’s not that he’s unattractive, and he’s far younger than the Vanderbilt, probably early forties if I was to hazard a guess, it’s just...

He’s a congressman and I’ve heard such terrible things about these people.

I can hold back my concerns no longer. "Sir, I must ask, but you don't seem like the typical politician..."

He bows. "Miss Joséphine, I take that as the kindest of compliments, and truth is, I've been in the United States Congress not even a full year." Now I find myself turning inwardly to face him. "I can only hope that finding my person in a nest of such vipers won't act in any way to change me."

"But why?" I stop just as we near a party of Papa's slaves, a dozen or so, as they cut down stacks of sugarcane with long scythes. "You don't sound like you even want to be there, so why are you?" My bluntness causes his head to snap back, *ah, yes, you have a spirited young one here*, might it be too much to hope I'll scare him away? No, of course not, men will concede an awful lot in a lady once they become infatuated which, undoubtedly, he is already.

The congressman removes his hat and glances towards Oliver just out of earshot and who's pretending not to care. "I'll be frank with you, Miss Joséphine. All I ever expected was to wait until my father passed on his tobacco plantation in Virginia, and then I was to run that for the rest of my life, raking in the dollars by the thousands." He now glances in the other direction to where Hiram, the apprentice overseer, is idly watching the slaves from atop his horse. "But sometimes a man has to give up his happiness in order to do what's right and, if I might be so bold, it seems to me that being forced to congregate with a bunch of sleazy congressmen is but a small sacrifice when compared to the lot of others."

My lips part ever so slightly as I find myself leaning closer. "That's... sir, I don't know what to say."

He shrugs in a way that makes it seem like it's nothing. "It's probably futile, I'm but one man in a house of thieves, but we're growing, our voices are getting louder and make no mistake, Miss Joséphine, change is coming. Maybe not in our lifetimes but one day," he nods to where Cornelius, a nine-year-old boy and one of my favorites is hacking down a length of cane with a blade that's almost as long as he is, "maybe one day in the not too distant future, young boys like that will be able to hope for a little something more out of this life."

A breath of air is forced from me and now I find myself staring at the congressman in an altogether different way. Some mishap with a silly cheroot? Such trifling things can be overlooked. Indeed, now such a folly makes him appear more human and I can only feel

for such a man, unworldly in many ways but in others more enlightened than anyone I've ever met, and he's certainly idealistic in the most inspiring of manners. He would bankrupt my papa, not to mention his own family's plantation, and yet still, I find myself drawn in by him, this Congressman Harper.

“Sir, if I too might be so bold, what's your given name?”

His stern face cracks into a smile. “Miss Joséphine, it would be my honor if you would call me Henry.”



## Chapter 4

Henry

What a pleasant stroll it was and through such plump land that will one day all belong to me.

That overseer, not Oliver, the other on the horse, he goes far too easy on them niggers, and does nothing by way of chastisement as they dawdle, idle, and drone endless songs doubtless of some land across an ocean they'll never get to see. That whip he keeps for display in his belt. What's its use if he's not minded to crack it every once in a while, just to remind them savages there's a crop to yield.

There might be some rabble-rousers in Congress trying to bring slavery to an end, they'll fail, of course, but on the off-chance they ever should see their idiot dream realized then it won't be owing to anything they're responsible for, no, of course not, and it certainly won't be as a consequence of any war some other lunatics on the fringes are speculating on. No, if that day ever comes, which it won't, but on the off-chance that it does, it'll be due to them machines from England rendering these halfwits obsolete, and what then?

That's the question. That's indeed the big question. Because these niggers can't live among us, that much is clear, and it's my job to ensure the white man never has to see that day arrive. In the meantime, however, there are whips to crack, crops to produce, profit to be made and a status-quo to maintain.

I see Miss Joséphine back to the house and we part ways outside the music room.

"It's ... been pleasant, Henry," she nods as though it's all a big surprise to her.

I'm almost tempted to try for a kiss but manage to stop myself right at the very last second, hard as it is, and now there's an awkward moment that seems to persist because I can't think of what the fuck I'm supposed to say, which is most odd for a Democratic Party politician, but that's what this girl is doing to me. It's even harder when your heart's pounding and you've spent the last half hour walking funny because you're so aroused you can feel the semen dribbling down the inside of your thigh.

I could embrace her!

Yes, why not try for that? And I'm just about to lunge forwards when Oliver, the bastard, scuffs his boots against the floorboards, ominously reminding me there's a cock tease lingering around like a bad fart under the duvet covers. "I will say good evening, Miss Joséphine." I'll have to fire him first opportunity I get.

She nods in the most delicately feminine way that pulls at my heart and causes more than just a little twitch down there. "Good evening, Henry."

And then I stand back and watch as she saunters towards the piano, her long blonde hair tied modestly high into a bun that I can't wait to press my nose against and inhale, delicate clavicles of the purest white flesh, the most angelic face I ever saw, tits that push scintillatingly through her garments and little buttocks that rest tantalizingly within her skirts and cause my belly to stir as she flicks up the frills and moves to perch on the stool. My word, but I've landed on my feet here, lady like that and a plantation thrown in?

And all for being a congressman.

She raises her hands to the ivories and then my ears are gifted with the most delightful of sounds. For several minutes, I can do nothing but stare from the shadows as my organ strains most painfully within my breeches.

*That* has been a problem. The moment I first saw her, right after I'd nearly choked to death on my fucking smoke, my johnson has been causing some considerable pain. Oh, how I desired to tear away her skirts and take her right then and there in the fields, but no, best wait, do it properly, marry her first and then I'll take her maidenhood, then I'll fill her with so much prime Harper seed that she'll birth twins.

I shiver frustratingly. Lord, but Joséphine has only gone and given me the fucking shakes. What to do about *that*? It's a fucking

sugarcane plantation, and an immensely wealthy one, there has to be a negress around who I can take it out on. But not yet, because even that has to wait. No, best deal with the father first.

And then I'll fetch me a negress.

I find him in his study feeding snacks to a brace of terriers of some sort.

"Congressman," he says, passing a glass of bourbon, "come join me." He motions to the other seat and it groans as I collapse into it. "Cheroot?"

I move to take one but think better of it. "Best not."

"Suit yourself." He places one between his teeth and lights up before taking a deep pull, inhaling the noxious fumes deep into his lungs and blowing out a huge cloud of acrid brown smoke. "So, this seals it."

I cross one leg over the other to conceal my still raging manhood. Can't have the father beholding *that*, no, that won't do at all. "What can I say, Mister Broussard, I am in your back pocket."

He throws another snack to the hound and it jumps up, catching it in mid-air. "Not just mine, no, I can't take all the credit for this."

I decide against telling him I meant 'your' collectively, so I deign merely to make a small concessionary bow of my head. It's taken three years to get to this point, to accrue the necessary funding, support, of the people that matter, that is, people like old man Broussard and the other planters, and finally to enter Congress and start making mischief. The planters put me there and once they put me in the presidency, I'll be in their back pocket still.

Yes, you heard that right. Once they put me in the presidency!

And soon as that time comes, as a Southern president, a *true* Southern president, that is, with true Southern sympathies, I'll be best placed to safeguard the South from Northern oppression. To ensure that our way of life continues and prospers without interference from them Yankee meddlers.

"We'll arrange the ceremony for a month hence." It's all in the way he says it that irks me, that it's done, all final, and beyond his control.

"A month?" I'll have exploded by then, many times over. Just thinking about Broussard's daughter and her tight virgin snatch is enough to bring on the shakes, as I've already discovered.

He smiles with pride. "Taken by her charms, I see?" It's an understatement. He shrugs. "It'll take time gathering all the planters

from as far as Shreveport, Jackson, Montgomery, can't have the wedding without them, they'll want to meet their congressmen, but don't worry, you'll be too busy in the meantime killing that tobacco tariff bill to worry about sweet Josie."

I'm not so sure about that. "She is like you said." I'd been advised to spin a yarn about my true ideals to win her around, which seemed to work a charm, thank the Lord, and even served to aid my recovery from that disaster with the fucking cheroot. Women are malleable so I'll simply take my time bringing her around to our way of thinking over the coming months, say I had an epiphany. I don't envisage much difficulty.

He chews on his bottom lip. "Josie's a spirited one, true, but a wife can be disciplined same as any nigger. If she gives you trouble, don't spare the rod."

I never understood men who beat their own wives. It's like smashing up your own front porch. Joséphine's hardly going to look good on my arm when she's all bruised. No, if a man's feeling a pang of frustrating turbulence down below, that's why the buttocks of negresses are built the way they are. Speaking of which...

I stand and tug down the hems of my weskit in an effort to conceal myself. "Mister Broussard, I trust I still have the liberty of your glorious plantation?"

He understands my meaning without having to explain myself and nods. A discreet man, much like myself. "You do indeed, congressman."

I don my hat and make a hasty exit, feel the cooler sundown breeze wash over my flesh and hurry down the path in the direction of the fields to where earlier I'd seen the niggers congregating around their huts. They're there now and one by one, as they see a white man approaching, the men lower their heads as the women shuffle away in an attempt to be evasive. It won't work.

"Massa?" One particular foul look specimen, male, with the largest gums you ever saw mutters.

I ignore him and examine the offerings. Several of the women have already slinked stealthily out of sight but I'm so riled up that right now I'd plow nearly anything. Their asses, they're all so fucking large, ugh, no matter. One negress, conspicuous with hair that's not quite so kinked as all the rest, a half-blood probably, ducks inside her shack. Like a fox entering a chicken coop, I dash after the wench, and soon as I bust inside there's a cry of alarm

from all within, but Broussard has them well trained and they know to quell their protests. There's one sow cooking over a stove while two more embroider with fat fingers. I find my quarry squatting behind three of her menfolk all standing with their heads lowered submissively, a half-hearted attempt at protecting her if ever there was one, and as expected none of them show any opposition as I seize the negress by the wrist and tug her out the hut.

"Massa? Massa," she sobs but ultimately doesn't resist, "where we goin', massa?"

"Wherever I damned well please," I'm scanning the surroundings for somewhere discreet, I probably should have planned this better but when you're this agitated...

The stables! Of course. My assuagement seconds away, I force the woman to pick up a clip, and she yelps when she loses a sandal from one of her feet. As it turns out, she is indeed a half-blood, probably one of Broussard's but who's to say, I've long since noticed they never look much like any white man who's sired them.

We enter the stable and I throw the half-blood onto a heap of straw being munched on by Conrad, my horse, then close the door, shutting us inside. I regret that almost at once, as it's now near perfect darkness and, well, have you ever tried finding a nigger in a dark room? But a few seconds is all it takes for my eyes to adjust well enough and soon as I approach, her teeth are conspicuous like the moon in a night sky.

I pick her up and slump her bodily over the dividing wall, grab the crop from my saddlebag, slice it once through the air and savor in that terribly satisfying sound of the leather bit splitting the wind apart. "Ugh, Joséphine, what do you do to me? Those sweet little buttocks, I can't wait to give them a thrashing the likes of which you've never received..." I strike the negress as hard as I can, causing her to yelp out in pain, again, I slice down across her buttocks, again, again, and again, "Joséphine, ugh, a whole fucking month, I can't wait that long, I'll burst long before then, explode from within," again and again and again, I thrash the negress as her cries only cause the angst to deepen, the frustration, agony, and only when I'm shaking so much, and my manhood is screaming so loud for me to end the misery do I tug down my breeches and position myself to enter.

From nearby something rustles and an enormous outline floats closer. I don't see whatever it is that...

## Chapter 5

Joséphine

**I**t's not until next morning when Henry comes to, by which point he's spent the night in one of our rooms being watched over by Clementine. I'm summoned together with Papa to visit where he lays abed.

"Could have been killed." He clams his eyes closed, the effort from saying those few words plainly paining him dear. "Killed. Want perpetrator swinging from tree." Again, he closes his eyes and brings a hand up to cover his forehead. "Do you hear me, Broussard!"

Oh, the poor thing, it pains me to see him this way, his head bandaged with red splotches seeping through like that. It was Harris, the stable boy, who'd sprung the alarm when he went to saddle Conrad for Henry's expected departure. He was found unconscious with his breeches around his ankles, a fact I'm not supposed to know, and indeed would prefer not to, but gossip travels fast on a plantation.

"Massa be playing with the horse, don'cha think, Miss Jos'phine?" There had been an odd twinkle in Polly's eye, though I had absolutely no idea of what she was referring. Playing what, exactly?

Now, Papa folds his arms. "Congressman, I know you're upset, but I'm not liable to hang one of my slaves owing to..." Papa can't find the words.

Henry tries to move higher on his pillow but gives up when it's too painful. "You don't believe me when I say it was one of your niggers that clobbered me?"

Papa's hesitation says everything. "Of course, I believe you," he doesn't sound convincing at all, "it's just," he unfolds his arms and then folds them back again, "there are no witnesses, so what am I to do? Hang them all? And then what of this plantation?"

This time it's Henry's silence that gives away his sincere feelings with regards that question, and the truth is I'm shocked. He's upset, sure, and no doubt more than a little concussed, not feeling himself, but hanging over a hundred slaves for getting kicked in the head by a horse is not going to do anybody much good, least of all the plantation.

"Henry, perhaps in a few days you'll be back to your old self and will feel a little less ... vengeful," I hope my words will serve to pacify the man who's almost certainly about to become my betrothed. It just doesn't do carrying around this sort of bloodlust, it's the sort of thing that weighs heavy on the soul.

Papa nods, agreeing with my sentiment. "You can believe me, congressman, when I say that if I had even a sniff one of my niggers was responsible for this, I'd string him up myself."

Henry grinds his teeth together and squeezes the damp cloth within his closed fist so hard that a vein appears on his forehead. "I'm not stupid, you know that, Broussard, I know what you're thinking did this to me. Well, sir, Conrad would never do that, and I *know* how to handle my damned ride, and I would *never*..." his eyes flick up to me and whatever it is he was about to say, he thinks better of it, which only frustrates him all the more.

"You know, congressman, none of my negresses were found close to..." Papa, likewise, decides not to finish his sentence and now this whole conversation is becoming confusing.

"My purse," Henry rasps the word and points towards the dresser where his clothes are all laid out, "I have exactly twelve dollars and forty cents. If there's a dime less then I want one in every ten of your niggers swinging by the end of this day, and at least half of what remains flogged raw."

"Henry!" I manage to suppress the gasp, just. This is monstrous and totally unbecoming of a man who's fighting to see the slaves freed. Oh, but that horse must have kicked the poor man hard.

Papa looks at me and then gestures with his jaw to fetch the purse, which I do. Well, at least it's present, which is a start, and it's awful heavy.

"Tip it all out," Henry wheezes.

I shake my head but do as he says, tipping the contents into his lap. Coins and bills spill out in abundance and I'm just about to start counting when, defeated, Henry swipes the lot against the wall.

The problem is that when a sitting congressman is making an accusation, it's not something that can be so easily dismissed, especially not after factoring in all the other circumstances, that he's almost certainly about to become family, which is why I'm not surprised to hear Papa's next words.

"Listen, let me gather the niggers together and see if anyone's given up," he concedes, taking a breath. "Might be they'll think hard on certain things if I threaten to halve their victuals."

This seems to at least partially pacify Henry and so an hour later I'm watching from the window, Papa the only white face in a sea of black as they gather around to hear his words. I make out Oliver looming large at his side, bullwhip limp in hand and traipsing on the ground. Nothing much happens, Papa's not the worst of planters and has never seen fit to whip a slave without just cause, and so after a few minutes he's bounding back towards the house, doubtless in the knowledge there'll be a dissatisfied congressman remaining on the property for some time to come.



## Chapter 6

Joséphine

I'm lying back on the grass beside the stream that borders the plantation, my nose in a book, some English romance about a girl who's betrothed to an aristocrat that treats her appallingly when all along it's the groundsman she's in love with. I adore it here, the peace and serenity, and have spent many hours doing this same thing ever since I was a little girl.

The wind gently stirs the long grass as a deer watches me nervously from a distance, the house, Papa, Henry, and everything else a ten-minute stroll behind me, the only sound in the world the gentle, rhythmical flowing of the stream, a sound as old as the world itself.

Something splashes, I ignore it and continue reading about the groundsman, whose situation seems helpless, after all, he's penniless, working-class, and he's up against the most powerful man in the county.

There's a second splash, this time closer, and so I'm quick to throw down the book and find an enormous dark-skinned man in breeches and torn shirt wading this way through the water.

A huge gulp of air is forced down me, adrenaline, as my vision blurs out and I scurry back in panic...

The man holds up his hands. "Miss Joséphine, Miss Joséphine, it's me, Cumberland..."

I continue trying to stand so that I might run, in the distance the deer darts across the vista, but I'm struggling to scramble to my feet...

"Miss Joséphine, it's me, Leon." His voice!

Leon?

I stop and quickly twist towards the voice, to the man, who's now wading onto the bank, water flowing off him like rain from a windowsill. I rub my eyes and the moment I recognize him there's the most relieving breath of air and relaxation in my belly, my heart.

Leon.

My head shakes of its own accord as he stops, a safe distance away, but close enough I can see the moisture glistening on two giant black pectorals revealed beneath his torn shirt.

So many questions, where to begin? But for now I can only shake my head, words failing me.

"Miss Joséphine," that smile again, and I know instantly that such a man would never hurt me, oh, but *he's* hurt. His face, eyes, nose, lips, they're all bruised and cut so terribly.

I lunge forwards, unable to prevent my hand from finding his swollen cheek. "Leon, what happened?" And what's he doing here?

He flinches from the contact, the pain, and there's something else, the obvious, I should not be touching him, ever. "Miss Joséphine," he pants, and where has he come from just now? "I...I had to run away, Miss Joséphine," his voice, it's grown so much deeper than my memories, like nothing I've ever before heard. Of course, we spoke briefly a few weeks back at the auction house, but to hear it again, now, this moment...

My mouth moves but I'm having difficulty speaking. "Run...run away?"

"Massa Boudreaux ... he send men with ropes and guns."

"Guns?" I gasp and unconsciously spin around to check we're alone.

The water continues to spill down his face, or maybe it's sweat, and the tight spirals of his hair are all flat. He smells pungent and as he gently lowers himself to the grass, I realize he's hungry and weary too, though there's still, always, that same unmistakable glow behind the eyes, even now, that he's happy, as well as relieved, to have found his childhood friend. "Massa Boudreaux, he...I..."

I place a hand on his shoulder and feel the impossible heat through the soaking wet cotton of his shredded shirt. "Hush now, Leon, there's no rush to explain anything to me. Save your strength. I'll run to the kitchens and fetch you something to eat."

It takes almost half an hour to return, but I come with a sack filled with venison, salt pork, beans, bread and an apple, and then I sit back and watch, astonished, as he tears through the lot with scarcely a breath. When Leon's done, he dips his hands into the stream to quench his thirst and collapses back against a large magnolia tree before causing an avalanche of its beautiful pink petals to rain down upon us.

"Looks like you don't know your own strength," I say, half distracted by a single pink petal that's settled and contrasts perfectly within the tight coils of his hair, which have now dried out and regained their vitality so that they're once again all standing on end in little clumps.

"Strength? Miss Joséphine, you don't know how right you be."

I turn closer towards him, so close that I can feel the heat radiating from the enormous muscles that bulge from his arms, as I now take to applying a herbal balm to his facial wounds. "Tell me what happened."

Leon's giant chest rises and falls. "Massa Boudreaux, he use me in tha fighting pits. Every night. I make Massa money. And others. Hurtin' on other niggahs." His head swivels to face me. "Then things go bad." He flinches as I dab at a cut beneath his eye.

Leon continues to explain that he was prizefighting and winning match after match, night after night. Word got out about this giant slave in N'Orleans who'd been defeating all comers until eventually the news reached the ears of the Irish heavyweight boxing champion, who'd happened to be in Atlanta for an exhibition bout. Davey 'The Stone' Malone made the trip southwest to N'Orleans from when he immediately challenged Leon to a bout under the Broughton rules.

"I never even hear of Broughton," Leon complains before saying that he actually liked Davey, who was treating him with respect, like a fellow pugilist, a professional. "He take me for whiskey and say tha English treat tha Irish like white man treat niggah, which in a way make us bruthas. Then Massa Boudreaux come to me before tha fight and say 'now listen up and listen good, you dumb niggah, I want you to throw tha fight.' He say tha reasons was beyond my comprehension and that all I has to do is put up a good fight, but let Davey knock me down in tha seventh, and that if I couldn't count that high there'd be someone there to give tha instruction." He pauses to place his fingers against his cut face and I can't stop

myself from shuffling even closer, my body now flush against his, so that I can inspect his bruises, obviously.

I'm completely enchanted by his story, my boring romance book long forgotten. "What happened next?"

"I have no choice. I do what Massa say. Put up fight. Get hurt. Bad. Hit back." Here, he hesitates to continue and starts mashing his cut lips. "In tha sixth. Davey come on strong. I defend. Reach out with a left. Connect with his jaw. Then Davey go down. He stay down. Not get up. Cumberland win fight and get taken out back. Then Massa Boudreaux arrive with goons. Start beating on Cumberland. Say Davey be kilt, that he be kilt by me. That Cumberland kilt white man and now Cumberland die same. They bring out tha irons but I resist, start hitting out. Cumberland not try to hurt nobody but Massa go down. Massa not get up. White man shout. Cumberland run. Hide during day. Travel by night. Take one week to find Miss Joséphine."

"My Lord," my arm attempts to reach around his shoulders, just for comfort, you understand, "such an ordeal you've been through," and I know he never asked for any of it, that none of the events in Leon's story were of his making in any way. No, he's just an innocent victim here.

And now he's a fugitive!

There's no doubting, no doubting at all that Mister Boudreaux will have men out looking for Leon and that when they catch up with him they'll waste no time stringing him up from the nearest tree.

I can't allow that to happen to Leon, the same who overcame his fear of water by jumping into this very stream and pulling me out. That day, Leon had risked his life for mine, and now that Leon's in need of help, I will do all that I can to help him because as a white woman the risks I face myself are marginal by comparison. It will be my honor, no, it will be my duty to help Leon.

But how? What can I do, really?

Bringing food is easy enough and presents only a minimal risk but what about everything else? Where will he stay? What will he do? For how long can he be maintained?

He's staring now, apprehensive of my arm that remains around him. "Miss Joséphine, I don't want to cause you no trouble."

"You will never be any trouble to me," I reach up to remove the pink petal from his hair but find my fingers lingering in those

coarse black strands, how he's so large and yet so gentle, the way he smells, it's almost intoxicating.

His eyes widen, almost in fright, but it's only a natural reaction, an instinct to the obvious, but he's quick to realize it's *my* fingers in his hair and any panic soon dissolves because he trusts me. "Miss Joséphine..."

My fingers wilt away, the petal in my grasp. "Sorry, it ... it's been bugging me, is all." I laugh and then he laughs and I shuffle away, coming to my feet. "You'll be out of sight here, at least for now," until the betwixt sugarcane is hacked down over the coming weeks and months, "so if you lay low you'll be safe." Oh, but it can only be temporary, he's still out in the open and exposed, which means anybody could happen by. I'm about to leave but I turn back. "Leon?"

"Miss Joséphine?"

I fiddle with my cuff. "Was it you who struck Congressman Harper?" My hand moves towards my chest, though I know that even if it was Leon, I'll still protect him, but will he volunteer the truth?

Slowly, he nods. "Last night, I sleep in stable, then some white man arrive with female niggah." His jaw twists away, his face a picture of torment. "He try do bad thing but I stop him." See! Immediately, he risked everything to tell me the truth, risked my betraying him, but I would never do that. "Miss Joséphine, I didn't know who it be."

Nausea slowly builds within me as I rasp, "*bad thing*, you say?" What kind of bad thing could he be talking about? "Leon, what did Congressman Harper try to do?"

Unable to utter the words, instead he just looks away and clamps shut his eyes.

"Don't worry about it," I say, reassuringly, "get some rest and I'll see you at dusk."

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Bad thing?

I don't understand. Henry was with a female slave and he tried to do something bad? What bad thing did Leon mean? And am I liable to wed a man who does bad things to slaves? Whatever happened with all that talk about emancipation?

I'm sure I'll get to the bottom of it eventually but right now I have some equally pressing matters to consider, like how I'm supposed to protect Leon.

Unfortunately, the moment I arrive back at the house, I'm summoned to see Papa in his study. His nose is inside an accounts book and he sighs when I enter.

"He's not happy, sweet thing."

I need a second to process this, his words and tone. "Who?"

"Who do you think. The niggers weren't talking, as expected, so now Henry's on the warpath." He removes his spectacles and stands by the window. "I'm not about to get into the specifics of why it's a bad idea having your congressman breathing down your neck when you're trying to run a business, so you'll just have to take my word for it when I say it's for the best that we make a few concessions here and there."

I remain silently rooted to the spot. There's nothing I can say or do that will make any difference to whatever it is he's already decided anyway.

"And concussion or no, that man's been stomping all about the place restless as an agitated bull. To say he's not happy is an understatement." He turns away from the window to face me. "Sweet Josie, the two of you are to marry," he says matter of fact, which of course, it is, a fact. He pauses as if expecting me to say something but since there's nothing for me to say, he just continues. "The original plan was for the ceremony to take place a month hence but he demanded it be brought forward to seven days from now or else it wouldn't take place at all." That, at least, forces an involuntary breath from my body. "With great effort, I managed to make him compromise, so, *ten* days from now, you are to marry the congressman and that's all there is to say about it." It's not much of a compromise. "I've sent niggers out with passes on fast horses to Alexandria, Jackson, Montgomery. Anyway..." he flaps a hand as if such details are beyond my business. "So there you have it. You may take Polly to N'Orleans in search of a dress and whatever else you think you might need." He retakes his seat. "Is there anything you'd like to say about this?"

"*The original plan*?" It came to me after a delay but there was something in those few words, as well as his tone.

His eyebrows rise above his spectacles. "Huh?"

"You said *'the original plan was for the ceremony to take place in a*

*month'.*" I can see from his expression that he knows he slipped up there also. "You decided on Henry a while ago, didn't you?"

He looks at me strangely and for a moment, I can't decide if it's admiration for figuring it out on barely a whim, or anger at being discovered. Finally, Papa pinches at the skin atop his nose and makes a loud exhalation. "It was for your benefit, all the others, I mean." He turns up his palms and I know I'm about to get the truth. "I wanted you to believe I was trying to find you the best match. I know...I know how that sounds, but I had only the best of intentions. This whole thing, it's a once in a lifetime opportunity for us all to make it to the top, not just you and I, but the *South*. This marriage, Josie, believe me when I say it's for the greater good, to protect our way of life." He stands suddenly, moves around his desk and places his hands on my shoulders. "By the grace of God, but you're one of the most beautiful women in existence, and together, you and Harper can influence those people who really matter - when you go to Washington - with *his* brains, power and influence down here, and *your* beauty and feminine charms, together we'll ... *you'll* be unstoppable."

"Unstoppable? What am I supposed to do, Papa?"

His hands sink in as he squeezes. "Become the First Lady."

## Chapter 7

Henry

Right now I really ought to be in bed but I'm just so darned enraged that I'm probably making my head worse by lying there doing nothing when I could be out finding my assailant and exacting a swift and just vengeance. No, I'll rest only then, after this injustice gnawing away at my sense of tranquility has been alleviated.

Oh, my goddamned head.

I was told about the words old man Broussard had with his niggers and naturally, I remain astonished such brutality yielded nothing by way of turning up who done it. Soft, sentimental bastard. A bloody fool too. Is it any wonder his last few harvests have been mediocre when he's been going that easy on his savages for so long? There can be little doubting how they laugh behind his back, but rest assured, such days as these are coming to an end because soon as I inherit the place there'll be an immediate return to discipline.

Seizing the gold and jewel-encrusted pommel of my stick, I stagger outside, bringing that Oliver man with me, and together we head for the nigger encampment. "Gather them all up and bring them to the communal area," I tell my man, basically a patch of dirt in the middle of the five cabins they cramp inside to sleep.

"Yes, sir," Oliver rushes within the first shack and shouts at the occupants to hop to it, or else, and before long the first niggers are exiting, bleary-eyed and exhausted. It's getting dark, no doubt most of them are sleeping, which is how they overwhelmingly prefer spending their free time anyway, and more than a few have that



dazed and confused look as they stumble out yawning. The obvious culprit would be Harris, the stable nigger, but owing to the fact he's all of about nine years of age, he can perhaps safely be ruled out.

I mark the negress who only yesterday evening missed out on receiving a prime dose of Harper baby butter up the snatch, her loss, but she can rest assured we'll soon apprehend the culprit and then she'll have another chance to accept an especially hot, thick, sticky dose, maybe even as soon as tonight if this urgent business gets taken care of, banging head or no. She spots me immediately, standing all arms akimbo like I already own the place whilst grasping my stick most menacingly, and she quickly averts her body in a way that only cranks me up all the more. She's got long legs the color of caramel, not sooty like most of the others, and which have grown muscular from hard labor.

I hitch up my breeches and declare, "niggers, for those of you who aren't yet acquainted, let me tell you who I am. I'm the man who'll one day be inheriting this place, and since I'm sure you have no idea what that even means, let me explain it for you all. It means that the day will soon arrive when each and every one of you savages will be owned by me." I give my words time to sink in, the potential ramifications. "Now, you all know why I'm here, and any feigned ignorance will only incriminate you more." I jerk a thumb at my still bandaged head and the blood that's somehow managed to seep through again even after its third change. "One of you bullet-headed heathens saw fit to assail me whilst engaging in a matter of personal business. Now," and I gesture to the large man beside me, the bullwhip ever menacing in his grasp, "we can do this the easy way or the hard way." I pause for effect, fully expecting one of these dolts to crack imminently. "What'll it be?"

Silence, save for the gentle, rhythmic swaying of sugarcane in the up yonder field.

I shake my head and begin pacing about the semi-circle. "Perhaps I ain't making myself clear? Perhaps you mistake me for Master Broussard? Perhaps you believe I will make some flowery speech and then leave you to go back to your huts? Whoever's responsible for my injuries, now's your chance to step forward and save yourself and everybody else a whole lot of pain."

"You want me to start hitting them?" Oliver says, loud enough for everybody to hear.

I raise a heedful hand. "Best give him a chance to come forward

on his own, I think, my being a fair man, and all.” Still nobody steps forth, or pushes someone else forward in their place, which is the truly surprising thing, since niggers are hardly known for their loyalty towards one another. No, all I’m seeing are a hundred bottom lips drooping across the ground. Exasperated, I spin around, running my hands over my bandages, the blood having dried to another crust, and that’s when one of these fucking niggers sees fit to make the sound of a neighing horse.

I whip round at once. “Who did that?” Silence. “Oliver, did you see who made that noise?”

He’s staring into the middle where they’re all packed close together. “Definitely male. Was either Jasper, George or Terrence.” He doesn’t know, but it’s an opportunity, for sure.

“Or Harris,” I say, grabbing the small boy by the wrist and dragging him out from the huddle, “looks like we’ve found our culprit.”

There’s a loud collective gasp as I drag him towards the nearby fence and throw him against the upright.

“Stay there, you little bastard.” I seize the bullwhip from Oliver and can already feel a twinge down below from the anticipation of dealing out some punishment. No way was I about to let some overseer inflict it in my place. I raise my voice to above that of Harris’s cries. “Looks like we’ve found my assailant. Haven’t we?” I don’t know what I’m expecting, that even now someone else might step forward to take the hit in the kid’s place? I already know that’s not quite how the nigger operates but even so, on some level I still assumed one of them might offer to be the big dick and save the kid, if only to gain swagger amongst his people. No such occurrence here, for they truly are a backwards, self-serving race.

Exhaling with despair, I take a practice stroke, slashing the bullwhip once through the air and as usual I shiver at the sound and beautiful sensations of the wind splitting, it truly never fails to bring on a spleen that must now be tempered to save me from bursting. I draw back my arm, feel my manhood stiffening in my breeches, and see Miss Joséphine walking gaily in this direction, a large straw basket in hand, the gentle breeze just barely agitating her skirts. I quickly thrust the bullwhip back at Oliver and snap at the boy to scamper, which he does. I then rush to close the gap before she sees Oliver holding the deadly implement and comes to silly conclusions

“Good evening, Henry,” to me, her sweet little voice is like nothing that exists on Broadway, “it’s a nice surprise to see you up and about?” Her tone definitely inflects upwards into a question, and by the way she’s squinting in the direction of the niggers, I’m thinking she’s curious less about my walking around and more about why I have them all out of their huts and parading for my amusement.

I should just tell her to stay out of a man’s business but no, must play the game until after she’s taken her vows, I remind myself, and only then can I start clamping down on certain behaviors. Thankfully, my trusty politician’s brain is quick to alleviate her apprehensions. “We were just discussing the dance I’m arranging to celebrate our engagement.” Brilliant.

Her eyebrows rise on her forehead and it’s incredible how even such a small action as that can cause my balls to quiver. My God, but she’s the very picture of perfection, a true pure-blooded French girl. “Really, a dance? How delightful.” If I can’t stick it in her soon... “I shall very much look forward to seeing it. Cornelius is especially *danseur*.” She makes that last word sound especially French. What the fuck does it even mean?

I flap a carefree hand. “The legendary rhythm of the dark man, Miss Joséphine, you can take the jungle out of Africa but you can’t take the African out of the jungle.” Shit, did I get that the wrong way round? What is this girl doing to me!

Her eyebrows furrow but if she noticed my faux pas, she doesn’t mention it. “Anyway,” she taps the large handbasket that’s slung over her elbow, “must dash.”

“But, erm, where are you going, Miss Joséphine?” It’s quite late to be heading out when right now she really ought to be inside embroidering or playing the piano. I’ll put a stop to this sort of behavior the moment she’s my property.

“Oh,” she begins as though it’s nothing, “I’m just heading out to find a nice spot to lay down with my romance book.” She lifts the flap to reveal some thick tome atop a picnic blanket. “In essence, it’s a commentary on England’s landed gentry and woman’s pursuit of higher social status. Perhaps we might read it together?”

I was indeed tempted to accompany her but think better of it, and so I’m quick to shake my head. Anything’s got to be better than that, but I’ll probably just fetch me that negress instead, which has got to be safer now everyone’s on alert, and I’ll not make the same

mistake as last night. No, she'll not evade me two nights on the bounce and my coconuts again twitch from the mere thought of what I'm about to do. "No, no, you run along and enjoy your book."

Joséphine nods and steps away, and I spend a good half-minute gazing at her buttocks as she does. When I turn back towards the niggers I can only pinch at the skin atop my nose and make a loud exhalation.

Because now I have to arrange a fucking dance.

## Chapter 8

Joséphine

““M\_y dearest John, you’ve been most wonderful hosts and it’s been such a pleasure visiting you these past three weeks here at Chatsworth.’ Indeed, and as all good things must come to an end, both Carrington sisters will be most subdued that the time to part has finally arrived.

*“The Lady Catherine had been anticipating a proposal from the dashing Sir Edward Chatsworth, alas, he seemed more interested in pursuing the young coachman who’d accompanied the sisters, however that might go. She might have settled for the Lord Hugh Chatsworth as a distant second, for his prospects in the family business seemed promising, it’s just that the awful limp afflicting his walk was terribly hard to get past. In any case, Hugh, as it later transpired, had proposed to Catherine’s sister, the Lady Edwina, only two nights prior, which now only left John Chatsworth.”*

I readjust my position so that my head comes to rest upon Leon’s thigh. It’s so hard with the muscle he’s built from years of carrying heavy sacks of cotton that it really ought to be excruciatingly uncomfortable, yet it’s anything but. I spare a second to glance up at him as I make the adjustment. “Comfortable?”

He’s staring down at me, mashing his lips as his hands dangle limp by his sides, almost like they’re unsure what to do with themselves. “Yes, Miss Joséphine.”

I squint. “I hope you’re not saying that just to be polite.”

He shakes his head.

I smile up at him and can’t help but reflect on how it almost seems like the last ten years of being apart never happened, so

seamlessly we've both fallen straight back into our old easy manner, which is quite incredible considering Leon's on the run and I'd be in the most unbelievable trouble if Papa knew what I'm doing, and with who.

"How are you enjoying your first ever story?" I couldn't believe it when he'd told me, and I knew at once I had to put that right. I mean, there's little doubting the slaves tell stories to each other amongst themselves, but from what he'd said they tend to center around plantation gossip, their masters and other slaves, which isn't much, really, and so therefore doesn't count because, well, I say so. Now he's learning about love betwixt the lords and ladies in a powerful country half a world away.

"I like cuz you read it, Miss Joséphine." Awe, how sweet is that.

I cough lightly into a closed fist. "Then let us continue..."

*"The problems with John Chatsworth were obvious, as being the younger of the three brothers, his prospects were least favorable, in fact, it was a wonder he hadn't yet been sent off to fight in the army, as was the lot for most spares to the family seat. He was the only brother without a title, which served to compound the misfortune for Catherine. Last but by no means least, he was boorish, uncouth, and knew not how to talk to a lady."*

*"Now, John regarded Catherine from across the drawing room, his clothes filthy from apparently having personally chopped the firewood that now kept the guests cozy. 'Cat,' he said in a manner most unwarrantedly familiar, 'grab your coat, love, and let's get lost in the hedge maze.'"*

*"Catherine was most surprised by her body's failure to shudder, but then there's certainly something to be said for the brute's confidence. 'Servant, my coat, please!'"*

*"Ten minutes later they were somewhere in the thick of it and Lady Catherine was finding it increasingly difficult to keep the scoundrel at arm's length, but to keep him at arm's length, she must."*

*"'Sir, I must once again implore you...' she hardly sounded convincing, even to herself, and naturally, the handsome rogue was not deterred in the slightest."*

*"'Come on, love, I just want to hold your hand, that's all, I promise. You don't want to lose me, do you, else you might never find your way out.' Hmm, it sounded convincing enough, for it was late evening and getting dark, though she did not wish to find herself with child, because who would marry her then? Certainly not this John scoundrel. And then"*

*her wife prospects would be forever tarnished.*

*"She again spotted the gardener shearing at the leaves and who physically appeared perfect in every way. Sigh, but if only he was one of these brothers and not a mere gardener who therefore could not even be considered. No, handsome gardeners were best kept out of sight and out of mind.*

*"The Lady Catherine..."*

"Wait, hold on there..." Leon shuffles beneath me and there's something in his good-natured tone that makes me place the book down and sit up.

"Yes?"

Oh, he's a picture right now, the way his eyes are looking all clueless. "Why won't Lady Catherine hold John's hand? She like him, no? Even though she pretend she don't."

I slap him on the arm, "oh, you," and roll my eyes, "you're so innocent. Isn't it obvious?"

He now looks even more confused than ever. "Obvious, Miss Joséphine?"

My face can't help but soften whilst surely I'm only seconds away from a complete failure at holding back my giggles. "*With child*, um, well, it's an English expression meaning to be pregnant."

He nods once, still not getting it. "Yes, I understood that part. But..."

"Well, the thing is, she's afraid to end up with child because that would destroy her prospects for marriage."

Still, he's not understanding this. "Yeah, I know that, but..."

Ok, now there's nothing I can do to hold back my giggles. "Oh, Leon, you're so funny, but since it's you, allow me to educate you a little about the way of the world." I can feel myself blushing but we've already come this far, so I guess there's no harm in forging onwards. "If she holds his hand, *Leon*, then she'll become pregnant."

For several seconds there's only silence, as he regards me, for whatever reason, like I have two heads. It's only when he's convinced as to how serious I am that *he* bursts into hysterical laughter. "Aaaahhh!" He rolls onto his back and kicks up his legs and I swear that if he wasn't so black he'd be red.

"Hey, what's so funny. You don't like the story?"

It takes him a while to come down, by which point I've long since been questioning what it is I said that was so amusing. "Oh, Miss Joséphine, please don't never change."

“What?” I start hitting him on the shoulder but his muscles are so darned large he’s barely even feeling it. “Leon, will you tell me what’s so funny.”

And that sets him off all over again and it’s another ten minutes later, at least, before he’s able to look at me straight and speak with a measured voice. “Miss Joséphine, please make plain to me how babies are born?”

My head jerks back. “Why, by holding hands, of course, didn’t you catch that part with Lady Catherine? And my former tutor, Missus Cartwright, had to leave when she was, um, with child, and she even confirmed it happened by holding hands with her husband.”

Mercifully, he’s all laughed out and now all he can do is shake his head in exasperation. “Miss Joséphine, sounds to me like you been hoodwinked.”

“Hoodwinked?” Why am I beginning to get the feeling I’ve been lied to my entire life, at least with regards to certain issues. “Why, I mean, what for?”

He wipes the accumulation of sweat from his forehead. “I dunno, maybe to spare your blushes.” He shrugs. “You white folks have your ways, some very strange ways.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh, but it’s a nervous, uncomfortable laugh. “Well, my blushes are certainly not being spared now,” because if I could see myself, I’d surely be the color of beetroot. I’m beyond curious, however, and so the next question is obvious. “Ok, so if you don’t make babies by holding hands, then how do you make babies?”

Again, he regards me as though I’m not of this planet. “You never watch the animals?” Upon my blank expression, he exhales and persists. “Miss Joséphine, there are male animals and female animals...”

“Yes, I know that.”

“...And the male puts his banana inside tha female’s peach ... and...” he makes ungodly gestures with this fingers, “that’s all there is to it.”

“Peach?” I hiss. Oh, so that’s what it does. Though I must admit, there’ve been moments I’ve felt a strange kind of anxiety down there, almost an aching, like when I found Leon at the auction house, for example, and when I was hitting him on the shoulder just then.



“Uh-huh.”

“And banana?” I mean, I’ve seen what he’s referring to on dogs and of course horses, but I always assumed it was for peeing because, well, that’s what I’ve seen them do with it. A blast of air shoots from my nose. Oh, but it’s not much of a thing to look at, is it? I’m still terribly confused, obviously, even a little conflicted. “How...how does it go in there?”

Any trace of mirth has now all but vanished, as Leon glances right, over in the direction of the sugarcane and the house, and left, to where the stream forever flows its crystal clear waters. We could well be the only two people in the world. Leon tugs up a clump of grass, and then another, and then he continues tugging up clumps as he speaks. “What happens, Miss Joséphine, is that you wake in the middle of the night with a lady nigguh touching you down *there*. It fills with blood. Expands. Goes real hard. And then she slowly lowers herself onto you whilst trying not to wake all the other niggus.” He twists away momentarily. “But nothing good ever come of it, Miss Joséphine. Sometime the baby be black and he be sold at auction. Other time he look kinda white and he be sold same as all the others. Boy, girl, it no matter.” He’s looking away now and sniffs a few times. “Why bring baby into the world for him to be sold?”

I feel the tears pricking at my eyes and have to swallow them back. It’s at least a full minute before I can bring myself to hit him again on the shoulder, but for whatever reason my hand lingers. “So, um, did ... I mean, erm, have you ever done this act?”

His magical smile returns as he nods coyly. “Few times. Don’t know why. But the lady niggus seem to like me.”

*Oh, I can’t imagine why that might be.* I’m silent for a while as I can’t help but picture Leon doing this thing, however it might go, because I still have so many questions. Eventually, I pluck up the courage to ask, “can I see it?”

“Miss Joséphine...” he says immediately, his eyes frantically scanning the vistas, left, right, forward, back.

I think I’m beginning to understand why he might be so nervous, but I’ve never seen one, or, at least, not on a human male. I glance left and right as well. “There’s no need to worry, we’re all alone out here, you know that, and we trust each other, don’t we?”

He nods. “You the best friend I ever had, Miss Joséphine.”

I swallow again because damn, I have a substantial build-up of

saliva right now. "Look," I exhale, "it's ok, um, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked, in fact, forget I ever did..." Apparently, I'll be seeing Henry's soon enough anyway. And lowering myself on top of his... The mood subdued and the book forgotten, I say, "best we get you to the barn then." It's getting dark now anyway.

He nods and together we head to the barn a short walk away. It's on the edge of the plantation and has been used to store carts and tools, as well as give the slaves a place to rest and take refreshments, but owing to it still being early harvest, it'll be another couple of weeks, at least, before it's required, which means that for now it's perfect for Leon to lay low.

The doors creak as they're pushed open and Leon steps inside before having to wipe the cobwebs from his face. "Sheeet."

I can't help but giggle as I appraise the place and feel the memories flooding back. "I've not been in here for so long. Do you remember it?" It's large enough for a half-dozen or so horses and even has piles of straw piled against the side wall. There's also an empty trough, table, and a few chairs. Not much, but with so few options it'll have to do.

"Course, Miss Joséphine, this where we play Hide and Seek, Tag and Blind Man's Bluff ." He sniggers down at the ground. "You was always so good."

"Oh, well, you know..." I flick my blonde locks from one shoulder to the other, accepting his praise with a total lack of ladylike humility. I guess it feels like I can act silly around Leon, just like old times. "How often did we hide in here? Hey, do you remember where we used to store our snacks?"

He gazes at me with that familiar twinkle in his eyes and then together, we glance over at the loose horizontal board at the far wall, and then we're rushing towards it and tugging it loose. It comes away and our nostrils are immediately assailed by the smell of cheese that's been left baking in the heat for ten years.

I scream and cling onto him, we both quickly shrinking away, and I remain clinging to his arm even after we're back in clean air. "Did you see that cloud?"

"I think I going to be sick."

"Don't get desperate and eat it, whatever you do," I chuckle, "there's more fresh bread, and cheese that won't kill you, in the basket, and I'll bring more every day." Oh, my, his arms are so large, as I slink my hand inside the crack of his elbow and begin

walking with him towards the open door. It's certainly been an interesting day, much more fun than sitting with my tutor learning Latin, and I'm not sure I want to leave but I must, else Papa will have the state militia on the lookout. I pull away and again notice his torn shirt. "I'd have brought you something to wear, only nothing of Papa's will fit you, but tomorrow I'm heading for N'Orleans," for my wedding attire, I can't quite bring myself to tell him yet, "so I'll see what I can find for you there."

"You too good to me, Miss Joséphine." His eyes appear to shimmer but in the fading light I might be mistaken.

"I'm just doing what I have to." I smile at him and step outside...

"Miss Josephine..." comes his deep, velvety voice.

I step back inside the barn, unsure of what he wants, and then all I can do is watch as he drops his torn breeches to the ground.

"If ... um, if you still want to see..."

And as I glance down at that dark, flaccid organ, thick as a rolling pin and that hangs halfway down the length of his leg, there's most definitely a prideful smirk rising on his cheeky black face.

*Darn, there's that anxiety down low again,* and as I twist away and slip out the barn, all I can do is ponder how on earth is Henry going to fit his inside of me?



It's after I've spent an hour playing piano for Papa, Henry, and Mister and Missus Dubois, the neighboring plantation owners, that I retire for bed. Henry bids me goodnight at the foot of the stairs, kissing me once on the knuckles, an action that apparently will not put a baby inside of me.

"Sleep well, my sweet fiancée, might be that on the morrow we can stretch our legs in the fields." He adjusts his breeches as the lantern light reveals a fresh patch of blood on his fourth change of bandages.

I make myself smile and say in my best French accent, "ah, cherchez la femme, monsieur." I wink whilst patting his arm.

He frowns just barely but otherwise nods, "um, yes?"

I can't help but smile as I turn around and head upstairs, however, it's soon removed from my face when I stare out my

bedroom window and watch as the lantern moves quickly in the direction of the slave cabins. It disappears as Henry goes inside, though there's a distinctive orange glow around the edge of the drapes, and then less than a minute later the shape of two silhouettes is discernible against the lamp as it hovers in the direction of the latrines before fading when it vanishes around the back.

## Chapter 9

Joséphine

**T**he roads, country, river, marshes and finally the majesty of N’Orleans are a blur to me this journey. I hear trumpets but the sweet sounds barely sink in, I see the paddlewheel boats but barely care. Even Oliver, who constantly twists around to overtly ogle his passengers, remains barely noticed by me, although Polly shifts uncomfortably against the bench every time he does.

There’s much on my mind. Obvious things, mostly, like what I witnessed last night. Questions, only questions. I suspect I know what Henry was doing, though I’ll have to seek clarification from the one man I trust enough to ask.

Leon.

I’ve spent the journey thinking about him in other ways too. *He’d shown me his organ*, right before I dashed away owing to nerves, anxiety, not to mention the desire to preserve his decency, as well as my own. It had all happened so fast, it was quite dark, and so I can’t be sure how much of that enticing image my mind is embellishing. Subconsciously, I lick my lips and feel that same stirring down below that I’d experienced at the time. It’s kind of frustrating, infuriating, almost, and if it gets much worse there’s little doubting I’ll be getting the shakes. I’d like to be able to talk to Polly about it, to ask how I can stop it, but don’t think I can. I don’t trust her like I do certain other people, after all, I’ve never allowed myself to get so close to another slave.

Stopping on Bourbon Street, Oliver swings from his seat and lands on the ground with his usual heavy thud before lowering the step for the lady and her housemaid.

"I no good with this kind of thing, Miss Jos'phine," she had repeatedly insisted throughout the journey and for the fifth or sixth time, I'd flapped a dismissive hand.

"It's no matter, Polly, your opinion is all I want. Just enjoy the chance to get away from the plantation," as well as my papa.

"Yes, Miss Jos'phine." From the way she was walking, not to mention her constantly squirming against the seats, I was left to silently question if there was something wrong with her buttocks. The poor thing. Now, as she descends, Oliver gives her rump a smack, making her cry out in pain.

"Nice and plump, you nigger asses," he spits a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt and his broad grin displays two rows of broken brown teeth. "Miss?" He holds out his hand for me but this day I'm determined to climb down without his help.

"I can manage." I lift my skirts and easily make the two steps. "Be sure to be here when we return." I can't help but notice I sound the same as Papa when he's ordering around the slaves and judging by Oliver's comical expression, he thinks so too. I allow myself a small inward chuckle as I step towards Polly, who's standing with an odd slant beneath the shade of a Magnolia tree. When we cross the street, somehow I can feel his gaze burning into my back.

"Let me hold the umbrella, Miss Jos'phine..."

"Oh, that won't be necessary, just relax."

We enter the bridal store and immediately upon seeing the range of dresses, I'm struck by the obvious. "What on earth is going on? They're all white."

The salesman approaches. "Madam, earlier in the year, Queen Victoria was married in a dress of white and now it's in vogue."

I stare aghast at Polly, who returns the look. "Oh, how dreadful. Haven't you anything, say, brown or blue?"

He coughs into a closed fist. "I'm afraid not, but I'm sure Martin's on Frenchmen Street will have something of the type you require."

I shake my head, in all honesty, it's barely worth bothering about and so I just point a finger in any old direction. "I'll try on that."

Ten minutes later, I'm wearing a white bridal gown, of all things, and Polly nods her head. "Miss Jos'phine, you look beautiful."

I wish I could be half as excited as she is. Perhaps I'll grow into

this role, within time. "Thank you." The dress is indeed all white, and the trails and frills are enormous and completely over the top. Queen Victoria must be a strange woman, though not half as strange as all the women who've mimicked her lead. Maybe next year weddings will be demure and discreet again. I peer into the mirror, unable to crack a smile, though even I can appreciate the way the dress makes me look, perhaps not completely unlike an English upper-class lady from one of my books, just in a silly all-white dress. The monstrosity's so large and unwieldy that my entire body is left completely to the imagination, all except for my arms which are on full display almost to the point of indecency. That'll annoy Papa but I doubt it'll cause a scandal. Oh, well, at least they look trim. I sigh. Best get it over with. "I'll take it," I say to the salesman.

"Are you sure? There are other dresses you're very welcome to try on." He must have perceived something in my tone.

I wave it away and try to sound more positive. "No, no, I'll take it." Fifteen minutes after entering the store, we're leaving with a large bag, what must probably be the fastest hunt for a wedding dress in history. "What was that place on Frenchmen Street?"

"Martin's?" Polly says, her eyes squinting. "Won't you let me carry your dress, Miss Jos'phine?"

This next part might be a little hard to execute, but it's either make the attempt or tell Polly to return to the carriage and wait for me there, which would only raise other questions I'm not prepared to answer. "Polly," I begin, feeling it's probably best to indeed comply with her request to carry the bag, "it's my papa's birthday approaching," in about seven and a half months, in fact, "and so I was thinking of buying him a new outfit for..."

Almost immediately, her expression is what gives it away, and I can tell at once she knows I'm up to mischief. I realize this too late, that generally, there's absolutely no requirement for a mistress to explain her business to a mere slave. I'm not used to this, you see. "Miss Jos'phine, best I not be told about it then," she winks, "if it's a present for your papa, that is."

I exhale and nod, thank the Lord she gets it. "Yes, thank you," for helping me become a better slave mistress, ugh.

And then we spend considerably more time picking out clothes for Leon. I'd thought about getting him something civilian, but that would only raise the obvious questions, and of the kind Leon would

be unable to answer, should he ever happen across a patrol. Of course, free colored people exist, but they're few and far between, and without the papers he needs Leon would be sent straight back to Mister Boudreaux from when he'd almost certainly be... I can't even bring myself to think the words. No, my only realistic option is to purchase an identical shirt and breeches worn by the slaves on our plantation and perhaps, at some point, I can figure out a way to...

Oh, I really don't know.

I'm liable to get myself into all kinds of trouble but what choice do I have? No, even if I knew my actions would lead to my misery I'd still be happy to risk it all, a thousand times over, for Leon.

Polly, on the other hand, knows to keep well out of the business of helping me search for slave togs, and neither am I minded to demand she helps. Instead, she stands by the wall, the bag having been placed by her feet, as she stares apathetically forwards same as she does when we're at the table eating dinner. Occasionally, whilst looking through the items, I study the girl. She is indeed attractive, definitely half-blooded, with a long slender neck and a certain quiet dignity about her. Was she the girl I'd seen last night being taken by Henry behind the latrines? And does that mean she's now with child? And Henry...

Don't get me started on him.

Truth is, I've barely even begun to consider Henry, what I think he did and the implications of his likely actions. Is there any point in doing so? Because it won't change anything and I will still have to marry him in only a few days from now. I do not live in a large house in England's countryside where I'm courted by a gentleman who falls madly in love and thinks only of me. There are no slaves over there, no negresses for naughty husbands to slink out and meet at night before putting his organ inside of her. Here, in Louisiana, slavery exists and, as I'm beginning to slowly understand, men will be men.

"Sir," I call to the attendant, "do you have these but larger, much larger?"

I buy brown breeches and a white shirt along with a loose-fitting jacket, all identical clothes worn by every male slave on our plantation. I also purchase a pair of boots, although I'm not sure if Leon needs them. When Polly leans down for the bridal bag, she does so slowly and carefully, and there's a distinctive sucking in of



air as she does.

“Here, let me get that...” I take the bag for her so that now I’m carrying both.

“No, Miss Jos’phine, I must protest...”

I won’t hear any of it and a moment later we’re leaving the store and strolling back down Frenchmen Street for Bourbon Street. I’ll not describe the looks we receive as I carry my own bags with Polly walking a couple paces behind me, but it’s a relief to finally arrive back at the cart where Oliver waits, which is saying something.

“Why bring Polly along at all if you carry your own bags?” He says, predictably.

I give him my best forced smile. “I know, I’m really bad at this, aren’t I?”

His eyes narrow briefly but any disdainful look soon disappears when he offers his hand for me to ascend the step. “Miss?”

I raise the bags as an excuse to forgo his assistance and take the step sans his help before sinking down against the wood, placing the bags in my lap.

Oliver doesn’t offer assistance to Polly but when she’s halfway up, he slaps her so hard on the buttocks that she squeals out in pain and has to seize hold of the frame to prevent herself from pitching forwards into me.

I’m shaking with rage, as she slumps back weeping, but I manage to control myself just long enough for Oliver, who’s still laughing, to leap atop his seat and take position with the reins. I clout him on the back of the head with the bag from Martin’s, squashing his hat with the heavy boots, and prompting him to yelp out in kind. When he twists around, there’s the sort of deranged look in his eyes that I don’t think I’ve ever before seen on another human being. He’s about to speak but I’m quick to cut him off.

“One more word from you, Oliver, and I’ll tell my papa you propositioned me on a quiet track on the way out here.” As it happens, knowing certain things about men, of their urges, can come in use, and I see the understanding in his eyes at once, the fear, but there’s also something else present, and I’m not quite sure what it is, something beyond anger, that I’ve committed an injustice here, perhaps. Truth is, it’s almost scary.

“And I’ll back her up,” Polly adds, for what it’s worth.

That, at least, helps Oliver recover, and he omits a derisive blast of air from his mouth. “Time to get you home, miss.”

## Chapter 10

Joséphine

**I**t's mid-afternoon by the time I'm finally able to get to Leon, and as I approach the ramshackle barn, I can't help but feel an increase in the awful anxiety I've been feeling all day. What if something's happened to Leon in the meantime? Perhaps Hiram decided to send a party to start cutting sugarcane from the far end of the plantation, closer to the stream, and my friend has been discovered asleep on a pile of hay? Or worse! What if Mister Boudreaux's men have tracked him down? Or a patrol happened by?

By the time I'm rounding the structure, my heart is screaming, and I arrive almost charging through the opened doors. I needn't have worried so much...

Because Leon's facing away, his hands wrapped around a crossbeam, as he pulls himself up before lowering himself slowly down, again and again, in some kind of exercise that I can only imagine must require incredible amounts of strength, especially at *that* size. He's discarded his shredded shirt and grunts with every lifting of his body, his black flesh shining from the sweat that pours down his back whilst the large, dense musculature of the same bulges as it works to perform the heavy movement. For unknown moments I continue to stare, no, gaze, as my anxiety shifts down to that other place I've been trying to ignore, which feels neither better nor worse, just more frustrating. Once more, he reaches full extension and the muscles in his shoulders pop scintillatingly, and then he's pulling himself back up, his head rising above the level of the wooden beam until his elbows are flexed and two biceps the size of cannonballs burst from his arms.

It's a jolt to my senses when he lets go and lands on the ground with a thump, making the barn's entire structure shudder as he does. He turns around and I immediately snap out of my trance. "Oh," his smile immediately fills me with warmth, the irksome day I've had forgotten so easily, "hullo Miss Joséphine."

"Hello, Leon..." there's a silence, not awkward, but noticeable, and then I remember I'm holding the picnic basket, "special delivery for my best friend in the whole world."

"Awe," he comes strolling over as the moisture continues to stream down his body, his chest, like two giant blocks of graphite above abdominals with very prominent lines separating them in such a way that each muscle is easily discernible, "I knew you would but you shouldn't have all tha same." There's no body like this on all the plantation, in fact I've never seen anything like it anywhere, nor even read about it in any of my novels. Papa doesn't like his slaves looking so big and muscular because, he says, that while larger brutes have their uses, working a long day hacking down stacks of sugarcane isn't one of them.

"And they're forever hungry," he told me that one time old Mister Fontaine had arrived trying to offload a couple of his more troublesome negroes, "no matter what you feed them, they always want more. No, Josie, *lithe*, that's what you want. Good, sprightly, lithe young niggers." He'd sent Fontaine away disappointed, him and his two slaves who'd grown too muscular.

Now, my mouth is suddenly very dry, despite the sudden influx of saliva, and I have to quickly swallow it back before speaking. "Special delivery..." darn it, I already said that, "um, I've brought you some new clothes as well, erm, and some bread, cheese and ham. I thought we might enjoy the bounty together?"

"Miss Joséphine, there's nothin' in this world I'd like more." His smell is deliciously pungent and when he approaches there's also a noticeable increase in the beating tempo of my heart. "Here, let me get that..." he takes the basket and together we place down a small checkered rug on which to sit before arranging the food on a platter. I'm unwrapping the cheese from its cloth as Leon tries on his new shirt. "Awe, Miss Joséphine, it fits." He's being far too kind, should he bend his arm the wrong way those seams are going to split.

"Um-hmm," I hum with approval, silently devastated he's covering up, though I recognize it's most definitely the decent thing

for him to do, even if it's beginning to look like the largest size in the store might not be large enough. "If you don't like it I can look for something else?"

He shakes his head and plucks at the collar. "I like it cuz you fetch it, Miss Joséphine."

How adorable, maybe I will indeed *fetch* him something else regardless, and then I watch in amazement as he tears through his half of the loaf, a hunk of cheese the size of my fist, copious chunks of ham and an apple as he tells me all about how he's spent the day.

"Quiet. Peaceful. I play with tha birds. They trust me. Come close. Sit on my hand. I stare into tha distance. Long time. Dreaming about what lies afar. Mountains, rivers, streams like this one, snow, even. Miss Joséphine, I hear that if you head north and keep going, one day you reach snow." He clamps shut his eyes. "I long to see tha snow. To touch. Feel..." he's silent for a moment. "I wonder if I'll ever be able to head north and never stop until I reach snow."

I shuffle closer. "Leon?"

"Yeah?"

My hand makes small circles in the dust. "What would you most like to do, if you weren't, you know, a slave, I mean?"

"That's easy," he doesn't hesitate and his face comes alive, "I'd be one of them railroad drivers. Awe, Miss Joséphine, did I never tell you when old Massa Guidry once take me from Charleston, South Carolina, all tha way to Richmond, Virginia?"

"No," I'm leaning into him now and I can't help it one bit, "please tell me."

The food forgotten, he twists around to fully face me. "'Cumberland,' he say, 'I need a particular big nigguh to accompany me this journey.' He never say why, and I know better than to ask, but we take a long carriage east, at least he say, all tha way to tha ocean, and then ... I see it." His head tips back on his incredibly thick neck. "Miss Joséphine, you never see anything so magnificent, tha way this giant carriage flies along on its track. Three days and three nights, we were riding this thing, faster than tha fastest horse, and during tha day Massa Guidry let me sit beside him. I spend all tha time staring out tha window watching tha country fly by. And tha food..." his eyes close as he rubs his belly, "no nigguh never taste nothing so good, and when we arrive I see Richmond. Massa say, 'it's halfway to New York, some place Cumberland never want

to be,' well, I disagree but I don't say, but there's no time to think because Massa make me carry a thousand heavy boxes back to tha train and then," he touches me on the wrist, which sends a delightful shiver riveting through my body, to be felt all the way down *there*, "we do it all over again, only this time tha other way." Again he tips back so that he can laugh. "Awe, Miss Joséphine, this country so large, no man could never hope to see it all in ten, no, maybe even twenty lifetimes. So much potential, aweeee."

"Huh," it comes out as a wisp of air, completely engrossed in Leon's story that I was. Of course, I've heard all about the railroads they're building, mostly up and down the length of the east coast and the Ohio River Basin, and that are gradually replacing the canals and rivers as a means of transportation. Leon's spirit and enthusiasm are remarkable, not to mention captivating, and yet at the same time I'm incredibly sad for him, that he has these unattainable dreams that I know can never be realized. Of course, Leon knows this, and that only makes it all the more incredible, that despite his predicament, his lot in this life, he's not discontent in the slightest. He has dreams regardless.

*Oh, what I wouldn't give to make all his dreams come true.*

"Miss Joséphine..."

There's nothing I can do to stop myself, completely powerless as I've become, intoxicated, as my body throws itself upon him, pitching him back against the dusty floorboards, and before he even has chance to make his inevitable protest my lips are crushing immediately against his. My hands are in his hair almost as quick, thick, coarse coils, as I explore this first ever kiss of mine with open eyes. His, too, are wide open, and like that they remain, with no small touch of fear, and only after reassuring sounds emanate from me do the whites of his eyes become less prominent. His lips are so very thick and make mine feel like they're being consumed, his odor this close is so stale, yet in the most delicious way imaginable, and still we remain in this position as that awful yet still somehow wonderful anxiety churns like a furnace in the pit of my stomach, as well as that other place a little further down. I have no idea for how long we've been cinched like this but slowly his body loses its rigidity as he, maybe even we both, begin to relax into this kiss even if still, his arms are hanging limp against the floor, unsure of what to do with themselves. I reach down and find his hand before maneuvering it for him onto my buttocks and only then, I think,

does the magnitude of what's transpiring strike, perhaps even for us both...

He manages to pull away. "Miss Joséphine, this..."

"I know," I hiss into his ear, out of necessity tearing my mouth away from his to say the words, "but it's alright." I know not what else there is to say, what I'm doing... but I just can't bring myself to stop this madness.

He sees it in my eyes, that I would never hurt him, and makes the smallest of nods, and because he won't do it himself, I have to move forwards myself, to reconnect our souls even though his hand is still where I left it, and I can't be sure if he's even aware of that, but then he begins to squeeze and caress the hard flesh beneath my skirts, which is when that beautiful thing, um, what I've come to know as the male organ begins to grow perceptibly from beneath his cotton breeches, strains against the weight of my thigh, and continues growing. Leon groans from somewhere deep inside himself, oh, and we're both absolutely trembling because...

*This is madness.*

I pull away breathing heavy, a thick clump of my blonde having fallen out of its bun, and if I'd felt that awful anxiety in my belly before, now, it's positively screaming, screaming at me to do something about it. But What? "I'm sorry, Leon, I..." I come to a stand and turn away but immediately I twist back and run into his arms to be swept off my feet and clasped so tight. "No, I'm not, I'm not sorry at all. That was wonderful."

As though I'm light as a feather, he spins me around as the barn interior blurs and he makes a deep grunting sound into my ear, which I take to mean he most definitely agrees. He places me down and we remain embraced for a long while as I soak up his addictive smell that's so powerful, the heavy beat of his heart, the incredible hardness of his enormous body that can almost make me believe could keep me safe, maybe even forever.

*Madness.*

*Total insanity.*

We pull away.

He stares down at his new shirt covered in dust and straw and all kinds of other unidentifiable substances. "Aweee, Miss Joséphine, I spoil my..."

I wave away his silly concerns, "it's for the best that you fit in with the rest, we'd probably have to make you dirty anyway," I

laugh at that, realizing how it sounds, and the sudden visible twitch from through his breeches forces my gaze to concentrate *there*. I'm closer to it now and it's daylight, and...

*How could that ever fit inside of me?*

And yet my body aches to know, yearns to feel him.

*Madness.*

Because I'm to wed Henry in but a matter of days.

And yet...

I don't think I can stay away. From Leon.

"I should probably go," I sound as subdued as I feel, but there are certain things I need to reflect on. We embrace once more.

And then I'm returning home with a book in a picnic basket, a woman who's playing with the hottest fire imaginable.

## Chapter 11

Joséphine

Papa reads from The New Orleans Advocate, spooning oats into his mouth. “Our first guests should be arriving within the next few days,” he says absentmindedly whilst turning a page, as though the thought has only just entered his head, before shouting across at Justina who’s standing by the wall, “so have the spare rooms made up, would you, and the guesthouses. Go on, you might as well get to it now.”

The maid dashes out the dining room, leaving only Polly in attendance with us.

Without moving his head, Henry’s eyes appear to run slyly over the girl before a wry smile slowly curls upon his lips. “More syrup,” he calls out.

Polly hesitates for a count of two, three, four, five, her eyes darting between Papa and myself...

“I said *more syrup!*”

She stirs, rushing towards the table and accidentally clatters into it. “Oh, sorry, massa...”

“You stupid...” Henry’s face flares red but one glance at me is enough to remind him to remain calm, “just pour the damned stuff and remove yourself.”

She retrieves the jug and pours the hot sweet substance over his oatmeal.

“Not too much, now. That’s enough!”

Papa peeps over from atop his paper but quickly loses interest and goes back to whatever’s in the news today.

I can only scowl. “Henry, it was right beside your hand.”



He shakes his head. "It's her job, Miss Josie."

Polly offers some to me but I politely wave her away before making a double-take at the back of her skirts. Unfortunately, she's turning around to again face us before I can determine if I truly did just see a number of red streaks, long and faint, staining the pleated white and blue material. I shake it away and recall that other hallucination. "Did anyone else notice any, I don't know, strange occurrences about the plantation these last couple of nights?"

"Occurrences?" Henry mutters, his nose back inside government papers of some sort.

Papa seems more concerned and two very inquisitive eyes glance up from behind his newspaper. "What are you talking about?"

"Two nights concurrently," I begin, "I've witnessed a late night glowing emanating from the fields." I pause for effect. "I was quite tempted to investigate."

The merest of amused snorts comes from Henry while Papa uses his paper to conceal from me the reproachful stare he gives him, but I see it anyway. He lowers the broadsheet and says to me, "you didn't go outside, did you?"

I'm quick to wave away his paranoid fears. "Oh, no, Papa, not at that hour."

His chest rises and falls. "Well then, you're seeing things, surely."

"Possibly," I rub my chin and decide the only reason I'm not laughing from my mischief is that I'm really not finding it funny, "but I saw it moving, Papa, all the way from the house, to the cabins and then..." I squint, as though the whole thing sounds completely bizarre, "around the back of the latrines, of all places."

Polly sniffs. Papa's chewing slows, "it'll be one of the niggers going to relieve himself," he says, as though it's obvious.

"With a light? They know the way, surely, even in the dark, and even if that is the case, why the triangular route?"

Papa's eyes flick towards the ceiling. "Ah, that. I sent Eustace to fetch some wood. He probably went for help."

I clasp together my hands and fall back against my seat. "So the mystery is solved then. At least now I know those pesky emancipationists aren't sneaking around causing mischief."

"Oh, no, we can't be having that," Henry snorts before quickly adding, "I mean, these things have to be done properly, lawfully,

which means through Congress.”

“Which means *you* and people like you, congressman,” Papa says, giving him the kind of look you could use to cut kindling. “Did you purchase your dress?” He’s quick to ask me, changing the subject.

I nod, “indeed I did, some beautiful white gown they say is all the rage in England.”

“White?” Henry barks, appalled. “How ghastly. That sort of thing will never catch on over here.” He shrugs, “well, it’s your choice, I suppose, white, green, blue, pink...” his voice trails off and it takes a moment to realize what he’s looking at. Because Papa’s lifted his paper as he leans back in his seat, presenting Henry and I with the ominous headline, ‘*Reward for Runaway Negro, \$200.*’ Beneath the headline there’s a large image of who can only be Leon and what’s more, it’s surprisingly accurate, brilliant, even, given it’s almost certainly been taken from a poster promoting one of his fights in N’Orleans.

My heart soars into my mouth and I have to squint hard to discern more of the tiny font from across the table as words like ‘*Cumberland,*’ ‘*6 feet and 7 inches tall,*’ and ‘*heavily muscled,*’ leap off the page. The image of Leon modeling for the artist wearing only a pair of breeches and tape around his hands is so imposing that Henry’s still gawping at it. Indeed, it’s not hard to see why I’m risking so much for this man but even I have to admit there’s a certain additional excitement that comes with hiding from the law my very own fugitive slave, and that he looks like *that* can only be considered a bonus, though for obvious reasons I can’t risk my betrothed getting a better look than he already has.

“Say, Henry,” I begin as I dry my clammy mitts on my skirts beneath the table, “we never took that stroll yesterday. If you have a spare moment then perchance we might go now?”

His head jerks to as he’s brought away from the daunting image, but then he nods and smiles.

Ten minutes later, we’re ambling across the lawn as Oliver and Hiram set off across the vista, their work parties heading in separate directions. *How long until they cut the sugarcane close to where my fugitive hides?*

I swipe lazily at a mosquito, “I’m happy your mood seems to have improved since yesterday.” It hasn’t, but if I can plant the suggestion in his head then perhaps he’ll think about dropping his

vendetta against Papa's entire workforce, many of whom I've known my entire life. I'm fully aware of what I caught him attempting when I was on my way to see Leon yesterday evening, even if he considers me too ditzy to have much of a clue. "It seems bringing forward the wedding has done you well, Henry." Or perhaps he's been satiated by some poor slave girl behind the latrines. I shudder, and besides, it's a strange way for an abolitionist to act.

"Ah, the gentle sex, you truly are our superiors," he tuts and rubs at the bandages that are wrapped almost entirely around his head, save for two white ears that poke out through holes he's cut through the fabric, "but I must inform you, Miss Josie, that my mood has not improved one little bit, and the moment I discover the wretch responsible for my attempted murder, then..."

From somewhere in the distance, one of the slaves makes the sound of a neighing horse, for whatever reason, and Henry visibly grimaces before bringing a clenched fist up against his mouth.

I exhale and shake my head. "What are you going to do?"

"He tried to kill me," he barks, "what do you think I'm going to do?" His jaw jerks to where a single magnolia tree looms large and alone in the next field, so there can be little misinterpreting his meaning.

I have to move my hands behind my back so that he doesn't see them balling into fists. Sometimes I'd really like to scream but apparently that's not befitting of a lady, though I'll die before I let him, or anyone else, lay one finger on Leon.

"Anyway," he flaps a gloved hand, "pretty young women ought not to be bothering themselves with such gruesome business as that, not when you'll soon be absorbed in the joys and wonders of Washington." For what seems like hours, Henry monologues about the capital, Congress, the Democratic Party, various bills he's involved with seeing through, as well as a few others he intends to filibuster. "That's when I'll stand and talk for several hours, days if necessary, which essentially runs down the clock so that there's no remaining time to have a vote." He'd be good at that, for sure, though all I can think about is that this is truly happening, that soon I'll be moving to Washington to be with my husband, to be shown off as a piece of arm-candy, to charm and delight all the right people so that Henry's, and by extension my papa's, ascent, might be realized.

My mind inevitably wanders back to Leon because all this talk of leaving this place, my home, only reinforces the awful prospect that soon, too soon, I'll once again have to say goodbye. Worse, because as I listen to this bore yammering on and on about law and bills and procedures, I can't help but realize how I might never again feel...

No!

Josie, you can't, you can't go there.

It's impossible.

And yet...

I can't stop myself.

I'm helpless.

Completely.

The excitement I've felt every minute since Leon returned, I've known nothing like it before. Not in my entire life. Ever.

"The Whigs are unceasing in their efforts to tariff our goods, well, that won't do at all, unless their aim is to kill all our trade, which quite honestly I wouldn't put past them, no, we can't be having that, the damned silly cretins..."

Leon's devilish eyes so full of mischief, big, plump lips that feel so soft against mine, intoxicating scent, unruly coils, enormous hard body that masks his gentle nature, beautiful black flesh that feels so smooth to the fingertips, and the fact that we can roll around laughing for so long that it hurts.

"...particularly not when we've crops to export; tobacco, cotton, soybeans, sugarcane ... did I say tobacco?"

Now, here, as I walk through our beautiful plantation with this man, I can't help but miss Leon all the more, as I long to be back in his arms where, perhaps, even, I belong.

*Golly, did that thought truly just cross my mind?*

I'm mad, truly mad.

And yet...

"...import taxes are bad enough as it is..."

"Henry," I say, so loud and abrupt that I startle us both, "I'm sorry, I forgot my tutor is here for Latin."

"Oh," he blows out air and rubs at his bandages, "sure, um, then perhaps we might reconvene this night ... ah, no, not tonight, I'm otherwise occupied, never mind, but I'm sure we'll find a chance for another stroll in the coming days."

"Cherchez la femme, Henry," I put on a voice that might be interpreted as being halfway seductive, whilst giving him one final

coy look as my body turns away. *I know what your plans are this night, you beast.*

“About that,” he readjusts his breeches and I can’t say for certain that I don’t hear the faintest of groans emanating from him, “I enjoy it, and all, and actually find it quite attractive, but I’m rather lacking for French, being of prime English and Irish stock myself, so perhaps you wouldn’t mind giving it a rest.”

“Bien sûr, espèce de bête,” I wink before heading back to the house.



Missus Leroux peers up from behind her spectacles. “Are you sure you’re feeling well, Miss Josie?”

Try concentrating on Latin verb tables when there’s so much racing through your mind. “Yes, thank you,” I respond in that language. I miss Leon so terribly and it’s only been a few hours. What’s he doing now? Is he hungry? Is he staying well out of sight? And what about the future? He can’t stay in the barn forever, time is ticking, and the answer to that question I still haven’t figured out. And then there’s everything else, namely Henry.

It’s the slowest lesson of my life but finally Missus Leroux leaves and I’m free to plunder the kitchens of victuals for the extra large ‘picnic’ I intend to spend the rest of the day enjoying. I take care to pack ham, soybeans, bread and jams into my hamper, placing them beneath my blanket and book. I also bring soap, as well as some paper and pencils for leisure.

By the time I leave the house I’m almost shaking from the excitement of seeing Leon again, even though the usual dread lingers in my mind as well, like a dark cloud that won’t go away. I’m playing with fire, so that’s to be expected, I just hope that nobody I care deeply about gets burned. Unfortunately, the track heading out to the barn passes between both work parties as they hack their way ever closer to where Leon hides. In fact, as I near so many men toiling in the moist heat, I can’t help but feel alarmed by the rapid progress they’re making, but when there are a hundred slaves under the threat of a bullwhip, perhaps it’s not really surprising at all.

I’ve spent time considering my responses to certain questions, should I happen to be asked about what I’m doing or where I’m

going, but as always the true danger comes from the unexpected, whatever that might be. Of course, there's nothing unusual in my heading down to read by the river, everybody knows that's been my favorite way to spend time ever since I was a child. *Don't be paranoid, Josie, because that's how you'll get caught.* Now, Oliver watches me from atop his horse, and I briefly consider stepping through the sugarcane to engage him in small talk but no, that would be most irregular and would raise questions of its own.

There's Hiram, however, sitting idle upon his mount on the other side, and I'm often known to speak with him so changing that routine might likewise be thought unusual. I like Hiram, having known him ever since he started working for Papa three years ago, and we're of a similar age.

"Miss J...J...Jay," he touches his hat and smiles in the big way he always does, and because his eyes are crossed, I can never be sure if he's staring over my shoulder or averting his gaze from me completely in order to avoid eye contact. The slaves seem not to mind him, and not once have I ever heard of an instance where he's had to employ his bullwhip, whereas Oliver uses it frequently.

"Good day," as so often, I feel the head overseer's eyes burning into me from the other field, "I brought you something." I lift the flap of my hamper, grab an apple and pass it up to him. Again, there's nothing unusual about this.

"Th...th...thanks, Miss Jay." Now, he's definitely averting his eyes from me, which might have something to do with the fact I'm wearing my favorite flower-print skirts that displays maybe a little bit too much ankle flesh, and that perhaps is irregular behavior, ugh, I'm so conflicted right now. All I wanted was to look appealing for a certain someone. Hiram bites into the apple. "You're looking n...n...nice today."

"Awe, thanks," I pluck a leaf from a sugar stalk and begin picking it apart, "say, I hope you'll be attending my wedding next Saturday?"

"Oh, y...y...yes, ma'am," he says at once, but after a beat his smile dips. *He likes me*, the sweet, silly boy, he always has. "I'm happy for you, b...b...but will be sorry when you leave for W...W... W...W...the capital."

My head tilts. "I'm sure it won't be the end of our acquaintance." We chat for a few minutes longer, whilst I wait for an appropriate opening to ask a certain specific question, and that's

when my attention is seized by the sight of Beatrice hacking at the long stalks as though she was as handy with a scythe as any man. When Hiram notices who I'm staring at, I'm forced to ask, "doesn't Beatrice usually cook for the slaves?" With over a hundred mouths to prepare for, that's a full-time occupation right there, and yet here she is.

Hiram shrugs. "Orders from your old m...m...man," he says through a mouthful of apple, "he wants the crop not w...w...wasted."

I gaze at Beatrice for a while as she silently cuts down all that lies before her. They used to have the same eyes, the very same, but in the ten years since Mister Guidry bought her son, that dazzling smile has never returned, and in all this time I can't say I've heard her utter a single word. I occasionally bring Beatrice apples and pears from the house, but all I ever get is a nod with a now empty glare behind those dark eyes, and the truth is I've never been able to tell if I'm the one she blames for that transaction which forever changed all three of our lives.

*Beatrice, your son is closer than you know and he misses you so very much.* Oh, if only she could hear my thoughts.

And then I'm struck by a terrible thought. What if Leon sees her? Oh, that might very well turn out to be a problem, one of those unexpected occurrences I'm so afraid of. I just hope that if such a time comes, Leon's able to remain in control of his emotions and not do anything we'll both regret.

Having had enough of the pretenses, and feeling another increase in my anxiety, I decide to come straight out with the question I've been waiting to ask. "So, Hiram, do you reckon you'll make it to the river anytime soon?" I'm quick to tack on, "all that sugarcane spoils the view, you see, oh, and perhaps I'll have apples waiting for everyone when you arrive."

The glazed over expression remains in his eyes, *he doesn't suspect anything*, and if it wasn't so important I might have felt bad for being so furtive. "N...n...not sure, Miss Jay, five, six days, perhaps?"

Hmm, that's not long at all, in fact, it doesn't even bring us to beyond the wedding.

I make idle talk for a few more minutes, briefly mentioning the plot of the book I'm reading and causing his eyes to cross even more. Then I set off casually walking towards that one place I want

to be more than anywhere else in this world, and it's the greatest struggle of my life not to be seen running to get there sooner.

When finally I enter the barn, Leon's lying back on a large pile of straw, his hands clasped behind his head in a way that makes his biceps bulge incredibly. He rises immediately and crosses the divide in two giant strides so that we meet in the middle.

*He misses me too, even if neither of us dares say it.*

"Leon..." I hiss.

"Miss Joséphine..." his gaze lowers to my ankles, *mission accomplished*, and he makes a deep, guttural sound that comes from somewhere deep within and almost seems to shake the entire barn, or maybe my senses aren't working properly right now.

"I..." I lose all control and of their own accord, my legs are carrying me into Leon's arms from when my feet are immediately swept up from the ground. I throw my hands around his neck and crush my lips against his, the pungent smell so intense whilst, using but a mere fraction of his strength, he pulls me hard into him in a way that makes my entire body stir. We're breathing so heavy against each other, our hearts thumping, no, screaming so frantically that we can feel each other's through our chests. My breasts squash against him in a way that only makes the heat intensify further, if that was even possible, and even though I have literally no idea what I'm doing, the logistics of this thing, all I do know is that right now I want only to wrap my legs around him and will him inside of me. I do just that, clasping my ankles around his back, and feel such an overwhelming, almost painful throb shrieking at me from that special place nobody has ever seen, almost like an itch that refuses to be scratched, that my body takes control of itself, instinct perhaps, as my hips grind with all their strength against his hard abdominals, anything to ease this inferno that's raging from within me.

It doesn't work.

And I'm so tightly wound up, so crazed, so hot, that I fail to realize Leon's slowly been making his way backwards, blind, towards the straw, until he lowers down upon it, myself a weightless passenger, and then my knees are coming to rest either side of his hips. Our mouths still connected, I hum dainty sounds inside of him and feel an exceptionally prominent organ throbbing from inside of his breeches, causing my eyes to widen with alarm.

*It's not going to fit inside of me, not by half, oh, but I'm more than*



*willing to break myself trying.*

I pull away suddenly, heaving for air, the sweat pouring down Leon's face making his flesh shine as I fumble frantically at the buttons on my skirts. I haven't a clue what I'm supposed to do, all I do know is that we're supposed to be naked and I can't get there soon enough.

But Leon's done it before! Yes, he has! And the realization forces upon me a terrible stab of jealousy, that I'm not his one and only, that he's been inside of someone else before me, and yet at the same time I'm counting on him to lead the way.

So conflicted...

"My hands, I..." they're shaking as I struggle with these wretched buttons.

"Here, I got those..." his voice is the deepest sound in the world and I'm quick to twist around so that he can aid my release from these troublesome confines and then, finally, there's a noticeable release of tension from behind as, one by one, the buttons pop away, followed by the thump of one of Leon's boots striking the boards, then the other, and I'm kicking away my slippers as well, trying to do too many things at once and succeeding at little, because this might just turn out to be a dream and I could wake at any moment to find Leon never came back and that I'm standing at the altar beside...

Enough of him. Forget him! Forget everything else in existence.

My skirts fall to the ground, which only leaves all the rest of my many layers, but we can work on those momentarily, right now I want this man out of his shirt. It looks like he's already been working on the buttons but stopped halfway through the task, the visible part of his large black chest a perfect contrast against the white cotton of the shirt I bought for him. He fills the garment so well that when the buttons are undone and I start tugging the sleeves from his arms, it's like trying to pull a sausage from its skin.

Once cast away, my hands are immediately roaming his chest, feeling the hard bumps and crevices, and no hair? The men in my books usually have chest hair in abundance and yet Leon's almost entirely smooth which, owing to the moisture that's settled upon him, only makes his shiny muscles appear all the more compelling.

"My corset..." I hiss and we commence untying the strings together, one, two, three, and then the sudden release of tension causes the sides to spring apart, revealing my breasts in their

totality.

I don't think Leon was expecting it, as his head snaps back ever so slightly, and I guess he might still be disbelieving of what's transpiring before him, and that seeing a small, supple pair of white breasts has finally brought reality home, the enormity of what we're about to do. Obviously, he'll have seen black breasts on a multitude of slave women, as I have myself when they bathe, and again I feel a pang of awful jealousy about that, though there can be little doubting that mine are the first white breasts he's been this close to. I've noticed that often black breasts appear larger and hang far lower than do mine, and suddenly I'm overwhelmed by a self-consciousness I've never before felt in my life.

*Do I look acceptable to him?*

My fears are soon alleviated when his hands immediately seize hold, devouring my breasts completely, and if I'd felt small before, now I feel absolutely insignificant as they're swallowed up by his palms. *At least he's happy, thank the Lord*, I can so easily tell from his lustful expression, dilated pupils and trembling hands, and there's nothing I can do to stop myself from sparing a glance south for that thing I can't wait to see, to *feel*, indeed, my mouth is already watering in anticipation as his organ bulges impressively from within his breeches, thick as my wrist and stretching halfway down the length of his thigh, as I squish my body against it.

"Awe," he groans, "you sure you want to be doing this, Miss Joséphine," he sounds awfully conflicted, almost like he knows this might be the death of him, but that it might just be worth it all the same.

"There's nothing in the world I want more." I'm not completely naïve, despite my age and inexperience, and I know that this can't possibly last. Even if I wasn't marrying another man in but a manner of days, this could never last, this could never be permitted, tolerated, allowed, not by any stretch of the imagination. As things stand I'm due to leave this place soon anyway, which only further serves as a reminder of the limited time we have together, Leon and I. This man is my first love, and that means it's only right that he should get to be my first lover. It's a tragedy but all we can do is enjoy this, our limited time together whilst we can. The rest of my life I'll have my memories, as I pretend to be a good wife to some man I barely care for, and that will have to be enough.

Leon follows my lead by slipping my petticoat down the length

of my legs so that now I'm standing in only my drawers. He makes another guttural sound that's all the convincing I need as to how he feels, that he finds me acceptable, which only intensifies the heat that burns within me. He slips his thumbs under the waistband of my drawers and together we tug them down, in an instant removing the final barrier so that now, for the first time in my life, I'm completely naked before a man.

He gazes down *there*, that special area I've only so recently learned about, of its power, and his entire body is overtaken by a shiver that transfers to me. That place, it's been throbbing like crazy these past few days, can't imagine why, but now, as he stares down and mashes his lips, it's absolutely screaming at me to put it out of its misery, as I feel the moisture that's collected like an ocean.

*Your wish shall soon be granted*, and I can't wait to know how it feels.

"I think you'd better strip down all the way yourself, mister," my voice has never sounded so fragile, but then I've never felt so vulnerable, so frightened, but in the most wonderful way.

It almost seems like he'd forgotten himself in the meantime, so enthralled he is by my pink lady bits with its fine strip of blonde hair. "Awe, course, Miss Joséphine..."

"Hmmm," I touch a finger to my lip, "I think that if we're going to be lovers, you'd best start calling me Josie."

His smile that I so love broadens, "I call you Butterfly, cuz that's what you always love catching." Well, it's been a while but that hardly matters at a time like this and besides, I adore it.

"I shall treasure the name." I reach forwards and attempt to wrap my terribly inadequate-sized hand around that thick piece of manhood that's bursting to be freed. "Now, about your breeches..."

"Oh, yurr..."

Despite my demands, it's me who makes most of the effort tugging those breeches down his legs and the instant his round shiny end is unsnagged, the whole organ snaps up hard, slapping against his sternum. He grunts and, I'm guessing, there's so much blood in this thing, that might usually be flowing around his head, that Leon almost appears to go faint and is only saved from staggering backwards owing to the dividing rail behind him. Thankfully, he recovers quickly and again reveals that smirk I recognize from when he'd shown me what he was stashing the other night.

Now, up close, in the light and having flushed with so much blood it looks totally different and I'm not sure if ... no ... I know, I'm not prepared to receive it. Before it was soft and flaccid, though still intimidating. Now, it's hard, pointing upwards at an angle and looks extremely angry, oh, and incredibly thick and lengthy, and yet so alluring in a way words can't even hope to describe.

It's going to be a memorable evening.

My tongue runs across my lips, again and again, attempting to spread around some moisture as I fix, wide-eyed, on the head, not the thickest part of him but not far from it, its dark purple color and transparent goo that's slowly seeping out. Lubrication, surely. Oh, how clever! Because I think it will be necessary. It's also shaped, I note, like a bulb to make entry more comfortable, almost like my body was made for this very thing, perhaps even for this very man, to accept Leon. Well, at least that's what I want to believe. I swallow and, remembering what Leon said the other day, gesture with my inadequate hand to the obvious, "um, you said I was supposed to lower myself onto this?"

Leon's still gazing down at where I can feel all kinds of sensations, blood rushing around like crazy, tingles, and one heck of a frustrating thrumming. "I think it best we hold up a while, do, ugh, do some other stuff fust." He manages to pull his eyes from *there* for long enough to jerk his jaw back toward the straw.

I nod and feel a sudden intensification of dizziness as the barn spins around me. "Ok," I take his hand and together we lower ourselves down upon the straw.

Slowly, he transfers his body on top of mine but keeps most of his weight bearing down through his forearms so that I'm not crushed, though when he inhales the scent from my neck, causing his eyes to roll up in his head, I almost fear he's about to buckle completely.

I laugh and feel his manhood, solid like steel, throbbing against my belly. I bring my hands around him and stroke the huge muscles in his back. "Don't be afraid," I hiss, "do what you want to do to me."

His nostrils flare, his dark eyes appear to glaze over, and then he's lavishing my neck with kisses, which immediately sends waves of shivers through my body. *I've never felt anything like this before*, as I close my eyes and experience the sensations of my flesh coming alive, responding to his every touch. His hand devours a breast,

completely enclosing it, making me feel so small and insignificant, and yet so protected, as blood surges through my nipple, enlarging it, and he nips it between two fingers, sending a groan through us both, and his manhood shivers against me as even more of his juice is discharged to rub against us. I'm not prepared for the moment when his hand slips slowly down my belly and makes the first contact with that piece of moist pink flesh, forcing my eyes open as my body bucks against his. He spreads around my sap as a fresh, never-ending supply continues to secrete from inside of me, providing the necessary grease for what's soon to come. I heave against Leon, pinned down by his muscular body, unable to move, not that I would even if I wanted, which I most definitely don't, ever, for I would stay like this forever, locked and entwined with the man I love and ought to be with but for this cruel world, our bodies a perfect contrast of black and white, masculine and feminine, and then his finger enters me...

"Hmmm," I breathe hot and heavy against him as his mouth moves from below my ear so that his lips can connect with mine, our tongues swirling together, my hips thrusting upwards, willing his finger further, deeper, as my walls close around it, the awful tension only partially satisfied, but in other ways it's been made worse than ever, as my body cries out for more.

Almost like he can sense my thoughts, his finger slips out, leaving an empty void, both down *there* and in my soul, but he's quick to reassure me when he moves up onto his knees, grabs ahold of his shaft and steers it towards my opening.

"Ugh, Butterfly, you really sure about this..." his voice is unrecognizable now, almost like gravel, his nose wide and flaring from the deep breaths caused by his rapidly beating heart, his entire body shining with sweat and eyes filled with fire. I doubt I could stop him now even if I wanted, which I don't.

"Please," my voice is also unrecognizable, "I want to feel you inside of me," to connect our souls, forever and ever.

He has to blink away the fog as he gives himself a couple of tugs before carefully spreading more of the sticky transparent substance that's seeping out from his tip around the rest of that thick, angry looking bulb. My Lord, but it's so long and veiny, and out of necessity I take a deep breath in preparation whilst bracing myself to receive him, *Josie, you're about to become a woman proper.*

"I, ugh, I press it against you fust, let you feel me, till you

adjust.” And the moment his organ touches my most intimate of parts, an incredible jolt is sent surging through my entire body. He persists, rubbing up and down, mashing against my folds whilst he bites his bottom lip, the willpower he displays by holding back, because I know he wants nothing more than to plunge straight inside of me, and yet I don’t think he could do that anyway, no, because my tight little opening will first need a bit of teasing, coaxing, before it agrees to open up allowing his size to enter. “Ugh, awe, I’m not sure if this is going to work...”

“No, you must, please...” I had no idea I’ve been clutching fistfuls of straw this entire time, so tense I’m feeling right now, but I spread my knees a little further apart and try to relax as he persists attempting to work me open, the squelching sound made by so much lubrication both delicious and frustrating, and then finally I feel my entrance parting as his thick, purple head just barely manages to squeeze inside.

“Damn, Butterfly, can you feel that crush,” again his eyes glaze over, though I wouldn’t exactly call it a *crush*, although I’m sure that’s what I’m doing to him. No, because the moment he entered me, I felt an incredible electrifying shock of pain shoot through my entire body, just for a second, before it started dulling out. It still feels like that, like I’m being stretched, torn open, because that’s exactly what Leon’s doing to me...

And it’s the most delightful feeling in the world.

After a few seconds, my body continues to loosen, almost like it’s telling me it craves more and Leon, sensing he can commence, slowly, so carefully, begins to reposition his body back on top of mine, allowing himself a better angle to control his entry and the thrusts that will soon follow.

“Hi,” I hiss as his head moves just beyond mine, because I missed him.

“I go slow.” Again, he bites his bottom lip, because it’s frustrating for him also, having to slowly break me in, but I’m hoping it’ll all be worth it in the end.

I nod and reach around his back, his body hard and rigid, his muscles popping from having to use all his strength to control his movements, and all to spare me from any undue pain.

Slowly, I begin to feel him pushing further inside, my body seemingly conflicted between remaining unbroken and doing what it wants, to accept him in his totality. Because I want the latter, I

attempt to further relax, even though the pain, constantly dull but with intermittent sharp pangs, is making it difficult for us both, but after passing a certain point I begin to think the worst of it might be over.

“You ok? Ugh, you want me to keep going?”

The tears are pricking at my eyes but I can feel my passage creating more oil, like nature is trying hard to help us out. My hands slide down towards his buttocks before pulling him into me. “Please, don’t stop.” They feel like they’ve been sculpted from marble.

And then I continue to be stretched further, my walls crushing his organ that almost seems to be never-ending, as parts of my body that have never known they even existed suddenly switch on and ignite, until finally, his pubic bone presses hard against my mons.

Connected.

Our souls together.

Whilst holding this position, our lips meet and we kiss passionately, I’m guessing because Leon wants to allow time for my body to adjust to being filled completely. It’s the most beautiful feeling in the world and I want only to stay like this forever, but the moment my lover starts pulling slowly out before forcing his way carefully back inside again, I know I thought too soon, because the feelings, the sensations and stimulations are even more intense, becoming better and better, ever more electrifying.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he begins to gather speed, continuing to thrust in and out of me whilst outside, from so close, the birds sing their wonderful song. Only a small distance farther away there are people who’d do unspeakable things to Leon if only they knew of what we were doing in this barn at this very moment.

*How can something so beautiful be so sinful?*

Wanting only to hold him in place, forever if necessary, my ankles lock around his back as I will him to persist. From the tip of his nose the sweat drips into the straw as our bodies squeak together with every hot rub of flesh, our rhythmical breathing so heavy that if I wasn’t so alive I might easily pass out.

Still he continues, slow, powerful thrusts that open me up from the inside, combined with faster drives, ensuring my body will never again be the same, all whilst the muscles that make up my walls cling to his every push.

My man groans, deep, unearthly grunts into my ear as I pant

and want only to scream, but I can't, no, I can't risk that, just in case, oh, but it doesn't matter, because... hey, what's this...

Something's happening inside of me, something Leon never mentioned, something I've never read about, as something big seems to be building, brewing from somewhere deep inside of my belly before slowly spreading down and up and left and right, all-encompassing, a brief pause, and then there's a flash of blinding light followed by a billion tiny yellow stars as my entire body explodes, seizes up and goes both rigid and limp as my walls pulsate around the thick black length that's still working inside of me, and my nails are digging into Leon's buttocks and the scream I was suppressing unleashes of its own accord...

I have no idea what just happened, but it was the most incredible feeling of my entire life but now, right at this very moment, in turn, Leon's entire body stiffens as he cries out, agonized, and then he's pulling out of me, leaving a void as large as my forearm, and he's back on his knees, one tug, two, and then a thick, white, sticky substance is gushing out from him, one spurt, a second larger spurt, followed by a third, fourth, fifth, sixth ... on and on it persists, a hot, creamy syrup that splashes all over my breasts, his eyes fully rolled back in his head, and my mouth can only hang ajar in complete amazement at the incredible yet unanticipated spectacle.

When finally no more cream is spilling out from him, I can only shake my head, one obvious question on my mind. "So, is this the stuff that makes babies?"

He's in such thrall, almost like he's existing in some other world, that it takes a while for my words to sink in, but soon as they do there's that look again, like I have two heads, and then we're both embracing, falling back on the straw and laughing so hard that it hurts.

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We wash in the stream close to the spot where many years ago Leon had saved my life.

"It seems like only yesterday," I sigh to myself.

He immediately knows my meaning and grunts in affirmation, his gaze unable to tear from my breasts. Bringing large palmfuls of water upwards, he cleanses my small, pink areolas of delicious



looking ‘seed,’ as he’d called it, that’s now dried to a crust. I was completely covered in the stuff, large globs over my hip, belly, breasts and even neck. Now it’s all drifting away downstream. He also explained why he didn’t want to put any inside of me and I’d understood his reasoning at once, and agreed.

No, we’re already doing more than enough to risk Leon’s life and my privileges as it is without making matters a thousand times more explosive. The slave women often give birth to babies of a lighter complexion to themselves but I’m unaware of a single instance of a white lady giving birth to a darker baby. Such things can never be permitted, at least not in Louisiana, probably most other places too.

Likewise, I take care with rinsing Leon’s manhood of the dried blood that now washes away. There had been a considerable amount caked on the inside of my thighs also, but if I can’t have Leon’s seed inside of me, then in a strange sort of way, I’m happy that a part of us both will spend the rest of eternity together in the ocean. That, at least, is a comforting thought. Regardless, I think I’m going to be sore tomorrow.

From a nearby rock, I collect the soap I’d brought from the house and then we spend a long time cleaning each other, enjoying it, exploring each other’s body, each and every little crevice and detail. I’ll miss his pungent smell that works a devil with my brain but I’m sure his new, soapy scent will be just as intoxicating. The cold water, in contrast to the still burning sun, brings out a million tiny bumps upon his black flesh that’s so delicious to the touch, large, solid blocks of muscle beneath soft skin that makes my fingertips tingle. I gaze down as his hands work on my own body, abdomen, inside of the thighs, buttocks, back, breasts, the way our colors contrast so perfectly.

Finally, we heave ourselves from the stream and embrace in a passionate kiss as we allow the sun to dry our bodies and then we return to the barn to eat, beyond famished as we’re both feeling. My gaze wanders across to the now disorderly heap of straw where only an hour before I’d become a woman proper. I can’t help but crack a smile, even though I’m feeling incredibly subdued right now, despite how happy I am also.

*Conflicted.*

“Whut are you thinking, my sweet Butterfly?” He reads me so well.

I exhale and place my hand upon the inside of his bare thigh close to where that organ which brings such pleasure hangs long, thick and dark. "I can't keep it from you any longer and it hurts so much to say..."

"You're getting married," he says, matter of fact, astonishing me with his perceptiveness, though the strain, the anguish that's plainly evident in his voice he's quite unable to disguise, "to that man I struck."

I'm quick to throw my words out, futile as they must ultimately prove to be. "I don't want this, I need you to know that, but I have no choice."

He nods and croaks, "I know how things be." His hand clenches around the cut of bread he's been holding, forgotten and almost certainly now tasteless.

I lean even more bodily against his arm, my fingers grazing so close to his organ. "But I want you to know it's *you* who I..."

"Don't say!" He's quick to cut me off. "Please. Don't. I feel the same, Miss Joséphine, always have. But we should know not to say."

Before I even know what I'm thinking, feeling, doing, I'm on my feet, a sudden rush of toxic blood to the head, the kind of toxic rush that will one day have me killed, not to mention Leon. "We could run away together. You and me. Leon! We could run away!" My eyes are darting around, all over the place, scouring for answers, anything. "There's an underground railroad. I've heard about it. *Read* about it. It exists, truly, it does. We can go north. To Canada. Anywhere! Leon," I'm bearing down upon him now, shaking him by the shoulders, "you said it yourself, that you wanted to see this country, the whole world. Leon, we could do it together." It's so perfect that I can't believe I'm only now just thinking about this but then, I guess, having my brains fucked out has helped me see my situation in a new light, the possibilities. I could do anything. *We* could do anything. I mean, it won't be easy, of course not, but together we can make it happen, somehow, some way, because what alternative do we have?

Leon, still sitting upon the picnic rug, shakes his head. "We can't."

"What?" I'm exasperated, no, no, infuriated that my fevered excitement is not being returned by the one man I want to do this for. "What do you mean *we can't*?"

He throws down the bread and now he too is on his feet, looming down upon me. "Cuz a pretty white lady running with a big, ugly niggah ... that's why! How far you think we git?" An awful, truly discouraging look appears in his eyes, almost like clarity. "No, we end this madness, right now, before Miss Joséphine git hurt." His nostrils bulge as I feel the most awful sensation overpowering my heart and then, as his jaw wrenches away, I hear the appalling words spoken, "Cumberland must go back to Massa Boudreaux." *Cumberland?* His mind is already away from me, *running* away from me.

I hit him so hard on the chest that the slap resounds throughout the barn. "No! No! No! That bastard will have you killed. I forbid it! I absolutely forbid it! No, I fucking command it!" Ugh, what do I sound like?

He realizes it too, that right then I might have been any old slave mistress, and he turns away before stooping to collect his clothes that are strewn all across the boards, straw and over a rail, because he's truly fucking leaving, right this moment, and all after what we've spent the last few hours doing, changing the course of both our lives, forever, he's just going to fucking leave.

"Listen to me!" I yell, more incensed than I've ever been in my entire life. "You're not leaving." It's the sight of him attempting to dress in the very shirt I got for him that does it, flicks a switch inside my head, and in an instant I'm shoving him, thumping him, striking him on the arms, body, shoulders, as he stands and takes each and every blow with barely a reaction. "You're not leaving!" Getting desperate now, I reach down and wrap my hands around his shaft because I can think of nothing else that can make him reconsider this insanity, this suicide mission he's intent on pursuing without having given it a moment's thought.

Immediately, he starts to grow, thank the Lord, and if my words can't get through to him then maybe my body can. "Ugh, Butter... ugh, you shouldn't..." his lips mash as my thumb and fingers are slowly forced apart as he continues to thicken.

"I can and I will..." I lead him by the manhood towards the straw and then shove him down into it, his weight causing a cloud of dust and particles to mist around him. Immediately I straddle his body, the sheer size of which necessitates a considerable spreading of my thighs and then, rising on my knees, I position his thick, bulbous, shivering head at my entrance where a considerable pool

of fluid has already collected in anticipation of the moment I cram him inside. I quiver the instant we make contact, knocking at the door, and pause, which is complete and total fucking agony for us both.

“Were those negresses as supple and as beautiful as me?” I hiss, all my rage, jealousy and hurt pouring out now. “Tell me, Leon, were they as tight as me, huh?” At that, I sink down and feel my entire passage stretching out obscenely, perhaps even beyond what its design intended, Leon biting his bottom lip, my body changing shape, perhaps forever, in order to accommodate him fully. I require a good moment, just sitting there, adjusting, waiting for the pain to alleviate, before I can begin rocking my hips, using the muscles inside of me to commence working his shaft. I lean forwards against him, lessening the discomfort, whilst heightening the control as well as pleasure and enabling me to groan into his ear, “did they ever give you it as good as this?”

“Ugh,” losing the fight against himself, his hands find my hips as the tears pour out from my eyes to roll down his neck.

“Say it,” I hiss into his ear, “I want to hear it.”

“They not you, Butterfly, they could never fuck me like...”

Whatever it is he says, I miss it completely as my senses are given over to another incredible explosion of ecstasy, blinding lights, stars, big, bright, beautiful shooting stars, and then I’m screaming, sending a scattering of blue jays from the roof of the structure, even some from the nearby trees, and I don’t know for how long this euphoria persists, drawing out all my strength and will, but eventually I come down from whatever the fuck that is to re-intensify my efforts, remembering my goal, that it’s Leon I’m trying to make explode because I absolutely must convince him to stay with me and what else do I have in which to compel him besides my body.

My Lord, but he will *not* go back to Mister Boudreaux, Leon, this stupid man I’ve fallen in love with, and I rock my hips, squeeze his size and work his length, fucking his brains out as though his life depends on it, ignoring the sharp, dull, eye-watering, tearing pain that consumes me, our lips crushing together like we might never again see each other, the taste of blood on our palates and an all-encompassing burning heat that devours our souls, then his fingers are sinking into my flesh as his teeth grit together and his entire body begins to shake before I’m being wrenched off of him a mere

half-second before a thick, sticky rope of creamy nectar is fired halfway across the barn interior.

I collapse into the straw and heave for air. “You’re not leaving me.”

It’s a good fifteen or twenty seconds before Leon comes down from the brink and envelops me in his arms. “Ok. I stay. Butterfly. I stay.”

## Chapter 12

Joséphine

Over the next few days, people begin arriving at the plantation. We have several outhouses and plenty of room within the main residence also but even Evergreen can only accommodate so many large families, especially when several of them are bringing their own slaves. Thankfully, the nearby town of Luling has guest houses and a little further away N'Orleans has many more.

“Our guests from Georgia, Mississippi and Arkansas ... especially Arkansas, would enjoy some culture for a change,” Papa had said when he waved away one plantation owner, his family of sixteen children, and a carriage of maids and manservants, “but at least they’re happy,” he’d added once they were out of sight, meaning they were happy after having met Henry, the congressman they’d bought, fully paid for, and put in his position.

To his credit, that’s one thing Henry seems remarkably good at, charming the wealthy guests and making them feel like he’s money well spent, and would continue to be, despite being fully occupied with government work and choreographing the dance he promised for the reception. One tobacco planter from near Jackson had been so filled with admiration that even after the long trip, he was in no bad state after being told there was no room remaining to accommodate him, and he’d left for Luling in high spirits. Another, a Mister Harding of Brunswick, promised Henry and I use of his coastal ranch in Savannah if we were so inclined to take a honeymoon, a thought which fills me with dread.

And then there are the children. It seemed like overnight a

hundred of them were let loose to run around on the estate. That's the hardest part of this. Being the bride, all the little girls are looking up to me, when all the time on the inside I'm dying, trapped as I'm feeling, and yet I have to fake being happy all the same. A half dozen of the girls have become so attached that they're incredibly hard to shake off, which is the absolute last thing I need right now, when all I can think about, whilst talking about dresses and hats with some of the ladies, is slipping out to see the black bull I have hiding in a barn on the far side of the plantation. We have but a matter of days remaining, myself and the love of my life, and I want to spend that time with him, but what choice do I have when so many people have arrived supposedly for me. Humor them I must.

Not that I don't find time for Leon, of course, it's just becoming more of a challenge, however, where there's a will there's a way. As usual, talking about the book I'm supposedly reading is all it takes to send those children to sleep and convince the ladies that perhaps I'm not the most rousing of company in the State of Louisiana.

If only they knew...

"Butterf..." our lips were on each other's before he'd even had chance to say my name, so late I arrived one evening, and as usual the food was forgotten until after we were finished. On this particular occasion, Leon folded me over the dividing rail and sank into me from behind whilst I grabbed ahold of my ankles for dear life. Only after several explosions did he pull out to unload his own, and since we'd taken to not wasting his seed, I was quickly on my knees and positioning my mouth to accept him that way. Well, if I can't have him inside of me the traditional route, I'll instead have him inside of me by whichever method I can.

By the way, in case you're wondering, he's the texture of egg whites and the taste of honey.

Not that we haven't come close to making a catastrophic mistake.

As I'd learned in the meantime, Henry and I will be leaving for Washington the morning after the wedding, and when I passed this news on to Leon there was a second inevitable argument when I'd wept in his arms and he'd promised to leave that very minute for Mister Boudreaux if I didn't instead permit him to kill the man who would, in only a few days, be taking me as his wife. Once again, it had been close, and his bloodlust was only assuaged after I'd got

down on my hands and knees to be ravaged from behind instead, and just to make a point, as well as to get yet one more over on the man who would soon be taking me away from him forever, I'd half expected Leon to finally loose his seed inside of me and yes, I think that was his intention also, but once again, right at the very last second he'd pulled out and gushed over my buttock with such force that I thought I'd been slapped.

Apparently, intercourse with Leon can get rather heated, especially after delivering bad news, and I can only imagine experiencing such passion with that other one.

"Why didn't you give me your seed?" I'd later asked when we were on the verge of falling asleep in each other's arms. Leon had reason to despise Henry more than anyone else in this world and surely, the ultimate act of satisfaction, of vengeance, would be to put a baby inside the belly of his fiancée, and yet at every opportunity, when even my own resolve was weakening, Leon continued to resist. I've been shown, indeed, experienced everything with Leon, all except for that one thing...

*How it feels to receive his creamy deposit deep inside my womb.*

And the truth is that I long for it, for my orgasm to suck his seed ever deeper inside of me so that nature can take its course, and the devil with the consequences.

Because this is love.

"You really want some big, ugly nigguh's seed inside of you, Butterfly?"

I made slow pushes with my buttocks against his manhood and felt him begin to harden and grow. "No, I want *your* seed inside of me."

He groaned and his clutch around my breast intensified. I brought my knees in towards my chest, reached around and positioned him at my opening, and I was cumming before he was even fully inside. He began slowly, with long, powerful strokes utilizing his full, considerable length, and only when he could no longer take it did he begin pounding my flesh with all the power of his muscular thighs and the repetitive sound of his hips slapping against my cheeks ricocheted off the walls to resound within the old structure that had become our love nest. He began to grunt and I braced to receive his gift, finally, that would begin the creation of our beautiful little baby, which I longed to hold, to love, to raise as our own only, once again, he'd somehow found the strength to pull



out, to twist away, and shoot his essence some way off into the distance.

Wasted.

I could only sigh. Maybe it truly was for the best.

It's a hard thing to explain, being both free yet trapped, ecstatically in love yet deeply unhappy, wanting nothing other than to carry your lover's baby and yet fearing that very thing more than anything else in this world. When this had begun I'd known only to enjoy it while it lasted, but as every wonderful day drew to a close and the rest of my life came that little bit closer, there was only uncertainty, not only for myself but also for that one person I cared so much for.

Sometimes, when I look at him, it almost seems like he's reconsidering my offer to run away together. Often, I'd catch him staring into the distance, at me, and then back across the unknown northern horizon. Each time he chews his lip, deep in thought as he appears, and occasionally he seems set to speak, but then, always, right at the very last moment, it's almost like he's assailed by better judgment and the words never form upon those thick, sumptuous lips.

And then the moment passes.

Indeed, so good he's becoming at reading my thoughts that I've even taken to daydreaming of arriving one day with my hamper basket, a few extra items of food, and then simply heading out there alone without looking back, just to see what would happen.

Would he follow me across the stream? Would he follow me upstate and over the border into Arkansas, then Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, *Canada*, freedom?

The trip of a lifetime, just me and the man I love. *Hear my thoughts, Leon, life could be like this forever, just you and I, making love for the rest of our lives.*

Last night back at the house, however, it was the sight of the lantern light once again hovering across in the direction of the slave cabins, disappearing, and then heading back over the lawn towards the latrines that finally convinced me of what had to be done.

That we *would* run away.

And sure enough, next morning, I stuffed the hamper with food, brought an extra blanket, flask and a few other essentials before heading out for Leon, fully prepared never again to return to Evergreen.

It was only when I neared the barn that everything changed.

They were on the other side of the stream, close enough to cause alarm and for me to recognize who they were, but not so close that I thought they had business on the plantation.

Now, as I stand, frozen, unsure of what course I should take, my mind is soon made up for me when one of the three men on horseback raises a gloved hand in acknowledgment. A couple seconds later, they're spurring towards the stream and pulling up before awaiting my arrival. I take my time, walking, not so slow that I might appear to be avoiding them and yet not so fast as to seem nervous or unnatural.

"Howdy there, ma'am. Name's Captain Book," he calls from across the trickling water, raising his thumb and forefinger to touch his hat, a fitting name for a patrolman, "and a beautiful afternoon it is."

"Pleased to meet your acquaintance, sir," I make a little curtsy and note the look of deranged lust on the face of his young colleague, a look I've seen a thousand times on Oliver and other men. I'm about to volunteer that I'm out here to read in peace and quiet, but decide I've no reason to make such an admittance. "Is everything alright?"

The captain and the third man are scanning the land that lies between here and the house, yet with so much sugarcane in the way, there's very little else to see, the barn excepted. "How's Mister Broussard? It's been a while since we've spoken." This is not unusual since nearly everybody for miles around knows my papa. The patrolmen, I note, are respectful enough not to cross the stream onto plantation property, at least for now, as they have no just cause to do so. I hope that won't change.

"Papa's in excellent spirits, sir, and I thank you kindly for the consideration." I set down the basket and take out the trusty tome from atop the blanket that conceals everything else inside. "You can trust he's fully occupied with preparations for the coming ceremony."

"That be his daughter's wedding, no?" Captain Book asks.

"That would be my wedding, indeed yes, sir, to Congressman Harper." I smile broadly whilst hoping the invocation of Henry's name might persuade the captain that all's well on Evergreen. "Not long to go now. It's exciting but we're all so very busy." I make a show of flipping the book over and patting the cover. "A rare

opportunity for some time alone, I dare say I'll be craving it these next few days."

The leering patrolman manages to tear his eyes from me for long enough to notice the barn, not far over my right shoulder, and where I pray Leon's staying well out of sight.

The captain notices the barn too. "Listen, ma'am, we won't take up any more of your time, but before we go I'd just like to ask ... you haven't happened to notice any unaccompanied niggers around these parts the last few days?"

"Unaccompanied niggers?" I shrug, "only the ones we have working here, of course, but they're rarely unaccompanied." I decide that showing some interest might be warranted. "Anything I should be concerned about, captain, some news to pass onto to my papa, perhaps?"

His eyes dip in disappointment. "No, ma'am, best not disturb Mister Broussard's work at this time." He touches his hat and is moving to wheel around his horse when his leering subordinate jerks his jaw in the direction of the barn.

"Mind if we take a look in there?"

Captain Book makes a double-take and a flash of anger crosses his face, possibly because his authority is being challenged by what has to be a man in his early twenties, but after a second his face softens as he reconsiders. His eyebrows rise on his head when he looks back at me. "You wouldn't mind?"

There's the most terrible thudding from within my chest and it's an incredible effort not to melt into the grass beneath all their gazes. Heaven knows how I manage to remain composed. "Of course, gentlemen, you're most welcome anywhere on Evergreen and at any time, especially considering your important duties, and I'm sure Papa will be thrilled to learn of your proaction on his plantation, especially considering the approaching ceremony." I try to make my tone sound halfway between friendly and cautionary, just enough to give the captain pause, which is no easy feat for a nervous young girl like me beneath the gazes of three big men on horses, and in the moment I'm not sure I've pulled it off convincingly.

Captain Book strokes his chin as his horse's hoof rises and clips idly against a rock, the water continues to flow past as the birds sing, the sugarcane sways with the gentle breeze and the world passes by so serenely whilst my entire life is being decided upon by

this one patrolman's fear of my papa's fiery reputation.

Finally, he shakes his head. "No, that won't be necessary," he gives his colleague the kind of look you could use to cut graphite, again touches his hat, and then the three of them are galloping away and over the slope.

I feel like I'm about to be sick, and if the chance for escape ever existed, now it's gone forever.

But if I thought that was bad, what happens next is truly appalling.

## Chapter 13

Oliver

The sun continues to blaze and a fresh stream of sweat pours down my back. That's the worst thing about this job, the ever-present moist heat, suffocating in its intensity. All day I sit on my horse as the sun scorches every inch of my body.

Fuckin' Louisiana. Stifling.

At least the niggers get protection from the crop that towers over them, not that the sun can damage that shit-colored skin anyways, at least not from what I've seen. No, born to it, they is, to the sun, the heat, being whipped.

"Quit dawdling," I call out to... actually, I've no clue who in the hell he is, or she, cos it ain't always easy to tell, and I wrap a hand around the bullwhip ever-present at my hip in the expectation my warning will be heeded. Cos next time there won't be no warning. "Useless heathen."

I'd love to whip them some more but generally a good thrashing only spurs them from stationary to slow, seldom from slow to fast, and soon as you pass a certain point they tend to stop altogether, despite having backs like bulls, and that's just the women. People think my job is easy but try bearing full responsibility for the success of the plantation's harvest when all you got to work with are a bunch of lazy animals who require a bullwhip for motivation, and who ply every trick in the book to avoid even a minute's labor. Heading for the latrine five, six and seven times in a day, taking forever fetching forage, intentionally blunting their tools on rocks, pretending to faint in the sun when we all knows full well they don't feel the heat like white folk. I've seen it all and seldom do

their tricks sucker me.

I hear that back in England they're making machines that can process cotton faster than a hundred, no, two hundred niggers. I can only imagine such miracle devices, and what I wouldn't give to have something like that here at Evergreen. Only snag is good white men being put out of work too. Scary. The future. What it might bring. What changes might such devices wreak on our way of life here in the South? I can see positives in doing away with all the niggers-who can't?-but what of all the good white folk?

England!

Now, there's a place.

I hear it's cold, not like this fly-infested swamp, and what I wouldn't give to feel a chill English breeze across my back this moment.

"Jasper, you little runt, I'm fuckin' warning you. Quit your singing!"

It had been a dream of mine, forlorn and hopeless as deep down I always knew it was, that one day I would marry old man Broussard's daughter and take her back to England. I'd get me a job operating one of these miracle machines and we'd live in a big house on the coast where she'd spend every night riding my dick. We'd have a dozen children and living happily ever after.

Can't do that now. Not if I want to keep my skin. And the bitch don't like me anyways. Never has, despite how well I always treated her.

Ungrateful. Her and her old man.

On his orders, I take her into N'Orleans and what do I get for my troubles? A clout to the back of the head and a two-day-long headache. That was the final straw, being treated like that, and in front of that Polly negress too. Hard to maintain one's authority when she goes back to her hut and tells everyone what she saw, how the white girl acts towards the head overseer. Little wonder that ever since that trip some of the niggers have been looking at me strange. I bet they all had a real laugh at my expense, and all because of *her*, the only girl I was ever truly infatuated by.

Like I said, she's an ungrateful bitch. Don't know what's good for her. *Who's* good for her. Ain't that the truth. And it's a tragedy, cos we could've been really great together.

Watched her grow, I did, saw her turn from a skinny little runt into the most voluptuous, awe-inspiring, angelic, nerve-wrackingly

beautiful young lady straight out of a fairytale that you ever did see. To be around her, every day, this fuckin' close, whilst not being able to touch her...

It pains me so fuckin' much.

But recently, since her introduction ball, which by the way I was excluded from attending, it's like she's changed, become more confident, a different person almost. I mean, she always did think she was better, but recently it's a thousand times more noticeable. The way she struts around like she does, just cos her old man owns the fuckin' place, and I swear to God, it's like she's trying to rile me, sexually, that she's doing her damndest to torment an honest working man who she knows can't get her out of his head. Shit, I bet she enjoys it, the misery she causes, not to mention the inflated sense of self I've little doubt my torture bestows upon her.

It's sickening.

And now I'm supposed to stand back, watch and keep my mouth shut whilst she marries that fancy lawyer from Virginia, impressive son-of-a-bitch that he might just happen to be. Just 'cause he received a fancy education, has wavy blond hair, nice mustache and most his teeth still in situ. Doesn't have my hips though. And he can't handle a nigger any better than he can a horse. Stupid dumb bastard. I wonder if the rumors about that are true, that he got kicked attempting to fuck his stallion. Probably.

Either way, I reckon Josie deserves better. Someone who can control the niggers and yield a good crop. A man with good hips, powerful, primed and ready to thrust his dick into that virgin snatch.

By far the biggest insult is that old man Broussard allows the fancy Virginian free rein of the place, to have his way with as many negresses as he pleases, and boy does he ever take liberties with that perk. Last night, for example, as I watched from behind the magnolia the Virginian rutting one of the negresses, couldn't tell which in the dark any more than I can during the day, but there was no mistaking the lashes he inflicted prior. Heard it, the whizz and the crack, a dozen of them, and the cries. Sick bastard. Fifteen years Broussard's been my employer and in all this time, not once has he ever offered freedom of the plantation to me, despite my loyalty. Should have gone to Molyneux's back when I had the chance but that would have meant never again seeing Josie so the whole idea was a non-starter. I spit into the dirt. Too late now.

There's a commotion from the next field and I peer across to see the girl herself conversing with Hiram. That's something she does every day, engage with that simpleton, no less in front of my own eyes, and all with no concern for my sensitivities. I feel the usual rise from within my breeches, the mere sight of her, does it every time, gets my blood pumping, and I have to shuffle from within my saddle, readjust, crush my cock against the inside of my leg for just a little bit of relief, perhaps some small semblance of pleasure, fleeting as it is.

Hmm, maybe I ought to follow her over to the stream, watch from within the crops and tug one out whilst she reads. It'll likely be the closest I ever get to busting that virgin cunt. I grunt, shuffle again, and watch as a flock of niglets start swarming around her whilst she doles out boiled candies.

As usual, Hiram receives an apple, and as so often he sits there biting into it with those big buck teeth whilst all around his squad dawdle and take advantage of his simple, easy-going nature. Damn, but if it weren't for me the entirety of this plantation would go to shit. Broussard owes me his daughter's pussy for that alone.

Jasper stops what he's doing and stares wantonly across into Hiram's field so I pull out my bullwhip, prime my arm, and let crack across the back of the little shit's shoulders.

He cries out, startling the birds and causing the bitch to look across from over the divide. I circle the boy from atop my horse whilst the rest of my squad take no notice. "I told you, boy, I told you. Now quit your crying and get back to the sugar."

Josie's still gaping and we make eye contact briefly until finally, she turns away, her nose pointing upwards like she thinks she's so superior. Never did like us disciplining the niggers. Sentimental woman that she is. Perhaps she'd understand if *she* was the one charged with extracting a yield from these useless savages. There are reasons my yields beat Hiram's every day of the week, aye, you ungrateful little bitch. Your tutors, fancy dresses, expensive books, and not forgetting one of the largest houses in the entire State of Louisiana, how much of it all do you and your ungrateful old man owe to my willingness to crack a whip every now and again?

Fuck it, but the old man owes me! If not his daughter's unbroken, tight little hole then at least to be made a partner. But no, he won't even agree to that reasonable demand. "I'm keeping it all in the family," is what he says every time I humble myself by



asking, which is yet another hurtful thing to say, cos all I ever wanted was to be his son-in-law.

The curvature of her hips, even through all her layers, provokes yet another stir down below, and I can only stare in lust whilst she continues conversing with the idiot, as my blood heats and the sweat continues rolling down my back.

*What I wouldn't give to plow her, just once.*

Again, I readjust myself in the saddle and cause a great creaking of leather, and then she's waving goodbye and strolling off down the track, not a single care in the world, and all without sparing a glance for me.

I suck on my lip for a while, watch after her, consider how things be. She won't know if I remain concealed in the crop and besides, she'll be so consumed in whatever shit she's reading that she'd almost certainly not notice if I loosed my nut all over the pages.

Fuck, but my balls are feeling so heavy right now, how in the heck's a working man supposed to concentrate with all that seething around inside of him.

"Fuck it!" I swing down off Sterling and tie him to a pole before raising my voice toward the niggers, "now, don't any of you stop what you're doing, not even for a second. Going to take a shit, is all, you got that?" Nobody answers, which usually means they're docile.

I make my way down the track and soon as Hiram's big head is out of sight I cut left into the crop, trying my damndest to keep the noise down and not to startle any birds.

I'll just tug one off from a safe distance, that's all, no foul and no offense to anyone caused. I know exactly where she likes to spend her time and just so long as I'm careful then there's little chance of causing a scandal.

I continue wading through the sweet stuff, shoving stacks aside and trying not to get slapped in the face by the recoil. Ever so quietly, I press on, aiming for where the crop's sparser and don't rustle so much, and by the time I can hear the stream trickling in the near distance I'm almost creeping. It's only as I approach the edge that I realize she's not in her usual spot beneath the shade of a magnolia in its full pink bloom.

What in the fuck? Where is she?

Movement in my periphery forces me to twist around and then I see her, over to the right...

Stepping inside the old barn?

What?

Why?

Maybe she's taken to reading in the shade? That's not like the bitch, but she's become so uppity recently that perhaps her old routines are no longer good enough.

The idea comes from nowhere and causes my heart to thud hard inside my chest. Because obviously, this wasn't the plan. Not at all.

But Josie's all alone.

Alone in the old barn.

Nobody else for a long ways.

And I gasp at the realization, the opportunity that's landed suddenly in my lap.

No!

I can't do *that*!

"But it's owed to me!" Her virgin pussy. If anyone should take it then it's certainly not some fancy lawyer from Virginia who's barely known her five minutes.

No, it's mine!

The mere thought of it forces a shiver to overtake me. It's gotta be better than busting one over my boot.

So tight.

And moist.

And did I say tight!

Fuck!

Can I really do this? More importantly, if I do, can I get away with it?

There's no going back if I choose this course.

Ever.

I could do with my horse, for sure, once it's done I'll be in need of young Sterling, which will mean hurrying back, quickly mounting and then disappearing in full view of everyone working. They'll know it's me. Within minutes, people'll start asking questions. Why's Oli taken off in such a rush? They may not find her immediately but they will eventually and then they'll know. No doubt about it, they'll know.

Maybe I should just forget this, take that shit and go back to work as if these crazy thoughts never entered my head.

But no, she's getting married in three days and then she'll be leaving the day after that. I'll not have another opportunity and

certainly not one as good as this.

Fuck, my entire body is shaking.

"I'm owed this," I remind myself. Boy, ain't that the truth. "All I wanted was to be your son-in-law, you son-of-a-bitch." I'd have made this place the wealthiest plantation in all the South, but I was never good enough. "Don't got a fancy education, blond hair, all my fuckin' teeth. Don't come from no rich-ass family."

Ok, Oli, quit delaying and get your ass over to the barn, there's a virgin pussy that needs bustin'.

I push out from the sugarcane and stride across the verge in the direction of the creaky old barn we use for storage, its double doors already wide open. They'll need closing, aye, that'll be my first job, to lock the two of us inside. I make sure to check back down the track. Nobody there. Good. I glance left and scan the vista across the stream. Nobody there either, not that there ever is. No, we're alone. Just Josie and me. More apt, I double-check the bullwhip's still attached to my person because I'll need that to throttle the little bitch once it's done, make sure she knows whilst I'm choking the life out of her that things could've been different, if only she, and her old man, weren't quite so spiteful, yes, I'll be sure to let her know my feelings as the light in her eyes begins to fade.

As I close in, my boots, almost like they've a mind of their own, scuff against the dirt, bringing me to a stop.

I can't do this.

No.

I just can't.

I'll never get away with it. They'll track me down and then I'll swing, unless...

...Of course...

I could just go back to work as if nothing's amiss, wait a while and send one of the niggers to clear the barn of rats prior to our requiring it tomorrow. He'll run back and raise the alarm but that won't matter, by then he'll be the obvious perpetrator.

Oh, it's so perfect.

And the more I consider this new plan, the better it seems.

Why?

Because without Josie there can be no wedding. And without a wedding the fancy Virginian will have no claim to the plantation. Old man Broussard will have no heir, which means...

I gasp...

Because it just keeps getting better...

I'm the longest serving employee at Evergreen, it's only logical I should be written into his estate, shucks, I might even inherit the whole lot, especially if, in the meantime, I show Broussard just how grief-stricken and understanding I be. What is the old coot, his fifties? How much longer can he have left with all that bourbon he tips back?

Just one thing's missing...

All I need is a good nigger to carry the can.

But who?

Jasper's too young and has too much of a sweet disposition. Nobody'll believe he's capable of what I'm about to do to Josie. What about Roland? Yes, Roland. I see the way he stares at his own women, no matter how unsightly they are, big, horny bastard that he's grown up to become. There's also a certain *look* to him, almost like he might snap at any minute and use that scythe for belligerent purposes. No, Roland won't be missed, not at all, in fact, I'm probably doing Broussard a favor in seeing him off before he genuinely commits an atrocity.

Roland it is.

My meat presses hard against my breeches so I give it a rub, "don't worry, not long now and you'll soon get what's coming."

I'm so excited, so sure of my plan, and so mother fuckin' aroused that by the time I'm rounding the side of the barn and entering through the doors I'm almost running.

Josie spins around immediately, naked as the day she was born.

Well, it's quite a surprise, for sure, and in the moment I'm fully taken aback by the unanticipated spectacle. Why the fuck is she already naked?

"Oli!" She screeches, one hand finding its way up to her mouth while the other's quick to cover her pussy. I can't help but glance down toward the fine strip of blonde she possesses and my already rock-solid boner twitches in agony. She moves her other hand down from her mouth to shield her breasts but I already saw everything. "What ... what are you doing here?"

My mind's still in limbo, so much so that I'm temporarily stalled. Seriously, why the fuck is she already naked? Was she expecting me? No, of course fuckin' not. Shit, is somebody else already here? The Virginian, obviously. Can't wait a few more days so they've found a place away from Broussard's judgmental eyes for a bit of

pre-marital tugging. It's a complete fuckin' disaster for my plans, and I rapidly scan every corner of the interior for Harper because if it's true then I can almost certainly no longer rape and murder the girl, for obvious reasons, in which case I'm merely here to clear out the rats, after all, they play a devil with the sugar, don't you know, and I'm just as surprised as herself to find her here - looks like it's back to pauperdom for me but it's got to be better than having your neck stretched. My heart sags as what I'd hoped was a lucky break begins to dissipate like a fart in the breeze, but after a few more seconds of silence, and still the Virginian fails to emerge from the barn's gloomy depths, the beautiful hope begins to ebb back, my length of prime meat having never diminished for a second.

*By God, Josie, but I will rape you because you truly are all alone in here!*

I'm still confused as to the question of her nakedness but very occasionally in life all the pieces happen to fit together and when that occurs you just have to smile and thank the Lord as you take advantage, and I'm beginning to think that this might just be one of those instances.

The smirk slowly curls upon my lips as I turn around and, without saying a word to allay her fears, I casually close the doors before dropping the plank within its slots, shutting the two of us inside. An ominous shadow casts upon us but there's nevertheless just enough light seeping in through the gaps in the broken roof that I'll still be able to enjoy the sights and shapes of her body, as well as the grief and turmoil upon her face, as I'm plunging in and out of her.

"What are you doing here?" She repeats, attempting to sound more authoritative but she can't sucker me, not when her voice cracks the way it just did.

Slowly and with a deliberate foreboding intended to further unsettle her, I unbuckle the strap from my waist and let it fall to the boards, and I can't swear that I don't hear the merest satisfying whimper squeak from the bitch's lips. "Not sounding so uppity now, are you, sweet Josie?" There's nothing I can do to prevent the laughter from escaping me, this whole situation's beyond satisfying and it's about to get so much better.

The barn stinks of sweat, the kind of intense stench I recognize all too well, but clearly my brain's doing all kinds of crazy shit right now. The Virginian's never done a day's hard graft in his entire life

and with all that vanilla essence he lavishes upon himself, this kind of deep, pungent sweat's the very last thing I expect to be assailing my nostrils, but he's not here anyway so there's little need to preoccupy myself with such concerns. No, it's probably coming from me and why not? Is this not the pivotal moment of my entire life up until this point?

"What are you doing? Oliver..." her tits, they're like nothing I've ever seen.

"Quiet bitch, you've had this coming for a long time and you know it," my fuckin' boner's so painful that if I'm not inside of her soon I'll burst, "now, since you're already naked, you might as well continue making this easy on yourself," I nod towards the straw and the heap of discarded clothes beside it, "so why don't you lie back like a good girl and spread your legs, nice and easy now, for your old friend Oli to enter you."

She backs away towards the straw and I'm almost tempted to start believing this might just be easier than I ever hoped to imagine. I drop my breeches, prompting another gasp, and give myself a few tugs as I close on her. She glances to her right and there's an almighty creaking of floorboards as the entire structure shudders, a second later an enormous shadow emerges in my periphery.

It all happens so fast and with the barn being mostly gloomy I fail to immediately see it, or *him*, even when he's looming down upon me. Indeed, it's the smell that registers before anything else, that and the dire feeling of alarm that reverberates through every vein in my body, the sensation that comes from knowing I just fucked up, big time. But it gets even more dire because as it transpires it's *not* an enormous shadow at all, but something far worse, and even after my eyes finally register the gigantic naked nigger towering down from above, they still refuse to believe it.

And why would they?

Because *that* raises all kinds of questions of its own.

My first instinct is to gape at Josie in the expectation she has an innocent explanation for being naked and alone in a barn with a nigger, because the implication this might be real is just far too sickening to contemplate. But then my lips are twisting in disgust as *that* diabolical possibility continues to flood my head. But *that* can't be true, can it? Because this is fuckin' Louisiana, and Josie's one of God's most angelic creations, not to mention the daughter of one of

the South's most notorious planters. The very thought, of *that* ... it's just so fuckin' ... impossible.

A large black hand clamps around my shoulder and then the next thing I know my knees are being driven down hard into the dusty boards. A cloud of choking filth sails up into my nostrils at the very moment the entire left side of my body descends into a spasm. He's clutching what turns out to be a sensitive area where the shoulder meets the neck and it's truly excruciating.

"Easy there, Leon, you mustn't hurt him..." come the words from her mouth. *Leon*? Did she just say Leon? A vague memory, but I can't think now...

I can only glance left, I don't know why, instinct perhaps, and soon as I do my face comes level with what can only be described as a pine snake. My eyes bulge, that can't be fuckin' real, the length and girth of my entire fuckin' forearm, as it droops down against the nigger's thigh, with an enormous dark, meaty head almost the size of my fist, but this place is so dim, and I'm feeling so delirious right now that my mind's obviously playing tricks. I force myself to glance up at this monster who's inflicting so much pain, my face contorting hideously, and all I can see returned is a set of bright white teeth glaring down as the stars continue to taint my vision and I feel an unbearable urge to vomit blood. The odd squeaks, the only sound now within the barn, are almost certainly coming from me as a stream of urine trickles down my leg.

Josie sniffs, the very last thing I want her to know about. "Not too much pressure, Leon," she pleads, her hand on his arm now, the way her naked hip presses against his, it's too much, too fuckin' much, and I'm so full of revulsion that I'd rather die than accept her help now, even as the terrible pain sears through my contorting body.

"It too hard, Butterfly, what he try do..."

"Then just k...kill me, you dumb nigger, go on, do what you want to do and they'll find you soon enough, and you know what'll happen..." wait ... *Butterfly*? Oh, my mind's made up now, they truly must be fuckin', and with that thought the terrible images persist through my mind, of one of our truly beautiful young ladies being defiled by this sub-human savage. This nigger's going to hang, alright, and I want to be the one pulling the rope. Shit, I bet this must be the same nigger who clobbered the Virginian and... oh, my stars, his fingers are cinching so hard into my trapezius that I

can't be long from passing out, perhaps never to wake again. No, they'll want to keep this little discovery to themselves, which means I'm done for, and there's a convenient stream only a stone's throw away that's sure to carry me off, eventually to join up with the Mississippi, and the hungry alligators will ensure this damned nigger gets clean away with my murder. I spit blood onto the boards and am ashamed to glare up at Josie with pleading eyes.

"Leon..." finally she succeeds in wrenching him away.

"Ok, Butterfly, I do as you say," his voice is so irritatingly deep that it jars my head. He ain't one of my niggers, that's for sure, no, because I'd recognize this one in an instant.

They back away and now there's only a strange silence as I attempt to heave myself onto my boots, and the truth is that I don't think any one of us knows what to say or what to do next. So, she's not about to let the brute kill me, which means that surely they must both realize this nigger's only moments away from swinging because there's no way in Hell I'm about to let this slide. I grasp the railing for balance, my shoulder still hitched up against my ear because I think the bastard's crushed a nerve, and my shirt's soaking wet from where his hand was clamped for so long.

I stagger back towards the door and regret now inserting the locking bar because that's going to be a bitch to remove. "Could you pass my belt, please?" I'm speaking to either of them, disgusted with myself to be asking for their help at a time like this.

Josie shakes her head and I almost fear what she's about to say. "You won't be needing it anymore."

I spit more blood onto the boards, I think I'm bleeding internally. "What do you mean I won't be needing it anymore?"

"You've seen something nobody must ever know about," the little slut says whilst somehow managing to make her ungodly acts sound like the most natural thing in the world, and confirming with her own words that this dumb nigger is indeed plowing her fertile little field, and with that unsightly pine snake too. As it turns out, my mind's not playing tricks, and my revulsion is only intensified. My Lord, but that is one big nigger. Where did he even come from? Oh, I'll find out. Even if it's the death of me, I'll find out about that, and then I will have my satisfaction.

"I can keep my mouth shut," I lie, "so just let me out and we'll forget about all this."

"You also tried to rape me," she says with a surprising calm, and



almost certainly to torment me further, she inserts her hand inside the nigger's elbow and the contrast in colors, of big, dumb, ugly, black brute and beautiful, voluptuous, blonde angel could not be starker, "so when I go to my papa and tell him the news, he'll see to it that you swing from the nearest tree."

I'm momentarily silenced, while even now I can't help but gaze at those sumptuous tits. What a fuckin' evil waste. "Then what would you have me do?"

She takes a step closer, tugging the nigger with her, his muscles glistening with the sweat that came from my humbling. "I think it's in all our interests that nobody ever finds out about this incident."

Actually, what she's suggesting might not be a bad arrangement, at least for now, so I nod, and even that small movement sends a pulse of pain shooting through the left side of my body. "Y...yeah."

"And I don't ever want to see you on this plantation again."

"A...agreed."

"Go far away, Oliver, and live the rest of your life in peace."

It wasn't the worst of it but rather an exclamation mark on my humiliation, having to ask the bitch to lift the bar from the slots for me.

And then a few minutes later, as I struggle to mount Sterling before taking off for the Lord only knows where, I make one solemn promise to myself.

That one day, soon, very soon perhaps, I'd return, and then I would wreak my vengeance upon them both.

## Chapter 14

Joséphine

Oli absconding presented Leon and I with an opportunity, but one in which we had to act fast. When Papa first heard the news he spent the first hour stomping about demanding answers, after all, we're in peak harvest and the man bearing most responsibility for its success or failure had, for no apparent reason, just taken off on a fast horse and there was nobody around who had a damned clue why.

I felt bad for Papa, as well as for his blood pressure, though not about anything much else after what happened. In the long run, I'm sure, things will work out for the better. Oli was increasingly becoming a thorn in my papa's backside anyway and that's without knowing anything about his latest barn scheme, so Oli's inexplicable vanishing might ultimately prove to be a good thing, even if Papa's unable to see it whilst he's spitting blood and making all kinds of threats to anyone in earshot.

"Papa, why not just allow the slaves to get on with collecting the harvest?" I dared ask after managing to find him in the fields where he'd taken it upon himself to start hacking down stalks of sugarcane personally, something I'd never once seen him do in eighteen years of life.

He'd given me a look as if to suggest I was mad. "What happens when you attach a plow to a brace of oxen?" It was an old line I'd heard numerous times, and although I was never quite sure how his analogy applied to slaves, Papa most certainly believed it did. "Nothing," he continued, "because they still require a human to drive them."

I exhaled. "Ok, so then why not just promote Hiram?"

"Hiram," he hacked down hard, sending his scythe through seven or eight stalks all at once, "he's a simple lad, the niggers barely respect him and I respect him even less."

"But he's worked for you ever since he was a lad, he's loyal, Papa, and he knows what he's doing." This was our opportunity, because with Oliver no longer around the greatest hindrance to passing Leon off as just another one of our slaves, and therefore to hide him in plain sight, was gone, which is why I tried my best to fight Hiram's corner because I knew I could get him to go along with it for the precise reason Papa almost certainly wouldn't promote him in the first place. Yes, I was aware of how much that was an unfortunate ironic drawback to our plan, not that *that* was about to stop me from making an effort regardless, because what choice did I have? Besides, I truly hoped that given the chance Hiram might very well step up to the mark.

Irrespective of Hiram, however, the plan was far from risk free as it was, no, in fact it was brimming with things that could go wrong, but it was also quite brilliant in its daring.

Just so long as the crop's good then Papa rarely concerns himself with what happens out in the fields, after all, that's why he hires overseers in the first place, but inevitably he'd be expected to run into Leon eventually. And what then? I recalled the events at the auction house when Papa had failed to recognize his former slave amongst so many others, and generally he's unable to tell one from another anyway, but the presence of Leon in any room is sure to draw anyone's attention, and might Papa remember him then, or at the very least recognize him as one not of his own.

And then there's Henry, who's spent the last few evenings becoming increasingly acquainted with the slaves whilst he choreographs the wedding dance. It would be far too much to presume he won't notice Leon's sudden appearance in the ballroom and then questions will be asked about why he hasn't been rehearsing along with most everybody else.

"Papa," I pleaded, "Hiram would make a wonderful head overseer if only you gave him a chance."

Papa waved a dismissive hand. "Hiram's an imbecile." He stooped to collect a large armful of crop before tossing it to the cart. "Damn, my back ... No! So much to do ... people running away ... peak ... peak," by this point he wasn't even talking to me but

merely saying things aloud to himself, “N’Orleans ... Roman ... shit ... where’s the nearest telegraph?”

I shrugged, as though I would have a clue.

“Bah!” He’d thrown down the blade, shoved past and leaped upon his waiting horse before galloping away into the distance and leaving me somewhat bemused.

It wasn’t until his return later on that I learned he’d rode to Luling and sent a telegraph to N’Orleans from where a courier was dispatched with haste to Oak Alley. This happens to be where Major Turner works, one of the most respected and experienced overseers in the state, possibly even the entire South. They know each other, Papa and the major, having once served together as young lieutenants in the militia, and now both being in the business of harvesting sugar, had made sure to remain in touch.

Major Turner, as it turns out, has spent the last three years since the death of Jacques Roman complaining about how his wife, the sole inheritor of the famous plantation, is running the place into the ground with her unrestrained profligacy and unwillingness to enforce discipline. To make matters so much worse, the major also suspects she’s been inviting one of the slaves to her bed.

“If the opportunity ever arises, Henri, just send the word and it would be my high honor to come work for a man such as yourself,” is what the major would so often say to Papa, and so it was next morning at breakfast when the same courier galloped into Evergreen with a response.

Papa unrolled the paper with an unsteady hand, held shut his eyes for a count of three, opened them wide and started to read. After a further few seconds, the smile slowly began to spread upon his face. “What’s your name, son?” Papa asked of the courier.

“Manuel, sir.”

Papa had gestured to the large breakfast spread before us. “You must be tired, son, why don’t you sit down and get your fill.” He’d then shouted for Harris to deal with the courier’s horse before sitting down to read the dispatch for a second time.

It appeared that Major Titus Turner would soon be making his arrival here at Evergreen.

How much did this news change things, really?

At first, it filled me with apprehension, but the more I thought about it the less it began to feel like the end of the world. Indeed, one advantage was that I would no longer be putting Hiram at such

risk by making him bear the full responsibility of having Leon surreptitiously integrate with the others. What it did mean was that if we were going to go through with our plan then we had to act quick because...

"He'll arrive tomorrow," Papa declared, slapping the table so hard that he startled everybody around it. No doubt about it, Leon would need putting in place before the major's arrival.

But how to go about that when even getting past Hiram was far from free of risks on its own.

We could wait until tonight before sneaking Leon into one of the cabins but Hiram's not quite so stupid that he wouldn't notice in the morning and then the inevitable question of from where the distinctive looking new slave arrived would be asked, and in his innocence there's little doubting he'd ask that of Papa.

No, this would need doing out in the open. Brazenly. *With* Hiram's full knowledge. And unfortunately, that almost certainly meant having to harness the obvious attraction the overseer held for me in order to impress the idea upon him. Don't get me wrong, I despised the idea of having to employ such a tactic, and Leon hated it even more, especially after the incident with Oliver, though by this point we had no other options and time was running short. Besides, knowing Hiram as I do, and that his simple disposition almost certainly meant he's not up to the task, I was able to persuade Leon that there are other ways in which a lady can attain a man's conformity, and they can be acts as small as smiling a certain way, light touches or subtle flirting. Again, the main issue for me was that I hated the thought of using him in this way. Hiram's a good man and a friend, though because needs must, abusing our friendship in such a manner is but a small price I'd be more than willing to pay, for Leon. I would just have to steel myself and see it through.

We would do it this evening.

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"You sure this is going to work?" Leon asks me from a safe distance as we stand near the cabins' communal flower garden.

"No, my love," I can only frown as I watch the first slaves trudging back after a hard day of laboring, "I'm not sure at all. You're certain you've never met Hiram?"

“Never,” he confirms, which at least means that any potential news of the missing Cumberland should not raise any questions on that score. Should a patrolman happen by then everything would appear legitimate, given Leon’s already donned out in the Evergreen style and will be occupied in the fields cutting sugarcane, as he’s supposed to be.

I take a deep breath and again remind myself we’ve discussed every imaginable scenario, rehearsed answers to every likely question, but none of it has assuaged my nerves at all. In the end, considering the pros and cons of leaving Leon in the barn forever, it was an easy decision to make, and once more I tell myself that the risk is worth it because this is the only possible way in which Leon’s life will be protected and that perhaps he might also have some small modicum of happiness in this world thrown into the bargain.

Thomas is the first slave to arrive, the young man for whom I was present when Papa made the purchase, and they exchange mere looks as Thomas pushes open the door to his cabin and disappears inside. Bertie, Charles, Henry, they continue to trickle in, occasionally smiling or nodding, and Howie even shakes Leon’s hand before introducing himself, though mostly the slaves are too worn out to even make pleasantries with the new arrival.

So far so good. Breathe.

A group of females approach from the dirt track, one particularly large lady keeping to herself somewhat off to the side of the others whilst maintaining a solemn gaze into the ground as she nears. I can’t help but glance up at Leon whilst trying not to cry as his mouth slowly begins to open.

“Butter...” he spares a quick glance for me before looking straight back at the approaching woman, “she...she still alive?” His voice cracks as he takes a single step towards the mother he’s not seen in ten years.

“She’s very much still alive,” I choke, but unfortunately the moment’s interrupted as Hiram pulls up his horse beside me.

“Who’s the n...n...new...?”

“One second...” I snap without looking at him, and then, almost like she’s able to sense her son’s presence, Beatrice glances up from the ground.

Her sandals scuff dirt as she comes to a stop and then there’s a pause. Disbelief. Perhaps even a tinge of fear. But only for a beat. And then it’s a miracle her legs don’t buckle out from under her as

she rushes into her son's arms. "Mah baby?" Comes the inevitable cry.

"Mumma!" Leon embraces his mother as a dozen slaves watch with curiosity from a safe distance.

"What the..." Hiram swings down from his horse, his hand moving towards the bullwhip strapped at his hip.

"We both know you don't want to use that..." I'm quick to tug him around by the elbow, making sure to give him a little hip bump as I do and saying in my sweetest voice, "Hiram, I think we need to have a chat."

## Chapter 15

Joséphine

**“Y**ou should all by now know exactly what you’re doing but if you feel like you’re about to fluff your steps, just look to Clarence and Mabel for the lead.” Henry had been particularly pleased by the aptitude of the two slaves for line dancing and so had placed them at the front. “I can forgive the occasional missed step, on account of having to learn *real* dancing at such short notice, but I will not forgive your resorting to shuffling, jigs, struts, breakdowns, shale-downs or any other nigger style of dance on the fly, and believe me, I will flog the first three deviators personally.” For whatever reason, he appears to stir before hitching up his breeches and then claps his hands together. “Good luck and don’t let me, or yourselves, down. When it’s over you may indulge in a spot of lemon drizzle cake baked by my lovely betrothed.” Henry wipes his brow with a damp cloth. “Ok, let’s take five minutes and then we’ll go again.”

All one-hundred and six slaves are presently assembled in our former dining room, now our impromptu ballroom, around eighty of which are engaged in final dress rehearsals for tomorrow, my wedding day. Now, I stand beside Henry, attempting to smile as he addresses his “drove” whilst the love of my life looms at the back, trying and failing at the impossible task of blending in. Indeed, Henry has frowned in his direction on numerous occasions and has surprised me by not making inquiries, until now.

“Good God, man, where did you come from?” He strides closer, prompting the huddle gathered around Leon to shuffle out of the way. “Your new, no? I’d remember a nigger of your stature. Well? Speak!”



The man I ought to be marrying, if there was any justice in Louisiana, averts his gaze to the floor. "Massa Olivah put me on punishment duty, massa, tha otha side of tha plantation." The bass in Leon's voice causes Henry's head to snap back.

"Oh, Good Lord, your voice," Henry shakes his head and then squints funny at Leon, almost pensively, and I'm not sure why, "um, punishment duty, you say?" It's quite surreal watching the two most consequential men of my life standing so close to each other whilst engaged in what can almost be called a conversation, and I can't help but note the immeasurable contrast between them. What's more, it's terrifying that Leon might slip up under the pressure, not that anyone would know he's feeling any right now, and I can only be glad we'd spent so much time role-playing the very question Henry just asked, amongst others.

"Yessir, I told to make tha cesspit biggah."

"The cesspit?" Henry takes an unconscious step away. "What did you do?"

Leon shrugs. "Massa Olivah just take a disliking."

"Can't imagine why," my beloved betrothed remarks sarcastically, "well, it's lucky for you he's no longer around to ask ... wonder what happened to him, the damned bastard shirker. Abandoning post at a time like this..." Henry exhales, "anyway, we can't have you dancing, you've missed every last confounded rehearsal, not that it matters in your case when there's no partner who'd suit." He studies Leon up and down before shaking his head with a particular distaste. "You think you can stand still and hold a tray?"

"Yessir."

"Really, you can manage that?" Henry hums. "Good, then we'll have you on server duties," he claps Leon once on the shoulder, "so it looks like you've got it easy. Easier than I have, that's for sure." Henry turns away with another questioning expression, almost like some giant, slow moving cog is cranking away inside of his brain, but after a second he returns to me, the moment gone, shakes his head and drags me off towards the kitchens, no doubt to spend the rest of the night mingling with rich people.

And thus ends the most I've seen of Leon since he rejoined the slaves three evenings ago.

It's painful, truly painful, and I'd be lying if I was to say I didn't at least partially regret jumping the gun with regards our plan,

especially considering the limited time we already had together. I don't know, perhaps I might have kept him stowed away at my pleasure for just one more night of bliss and introduced him to his friends in the morning, I do ache for him so, and now that Leon works all day it's impossible for us to spend any time together at all. No, it's regrettable, heartbreaking even, but I probably have to concede that our dalliance is now over.

But he's safe!

That's the most important thing and I will never regret that.

Mercifully, I'm kept busy myself, which at least serves to take my mind partially off my longing. Food, decorations, flowers, not to mention bewitching the ever increasing number of arrivals are all more than enough to keep a bride-to-be occupied.

But barely for a minute does my mind remain from him before it's assailed by the torturous thoughts of pressing my lips against his, of feeling the heat of his body against mine, and of being filled, completely, by Leon.

And the day after tomorrow, for the second time in our lives, we will be parted.

## Chapter 16

Joséphine

My wedding day.

And there are more people at Evergreen than I ever imagined there would be.

Judges, lawyers, military officers, more planters than perhaps have ever been assembled in the history of the South, a number of very prominent slavers, and last but by no means least, no fewer than thirty Democrat congressmen with whom I'm briefly introduced and which are expected to form a powerful bloc in the House with Henry at its head.

"Remember, they're all here for you, my sweet," Papa lies after finding me in the drawing-room where I sit waiting in my white bridal gown, "I know you won't fail in your duty to the South." He embraces me and says he'll be waiting on the porch to walk with me to the altar and the moment he leaves, closing the door, I'm truly struck by the grandeur of the occasion, what really ought to be the happiest day of my life but isn't, far from it, in fact.

The sight through the window of just one of the magnificent lawn marquees alone is enough to make me crave a dark hole where I could curl up into a ball and remain forever. And then there are the buffets, so much food we could feed the Louisiana militia, enough wine to intoxicate the same, piles and piles of gifts, both for Henry and I as well as for the guests to take home, and these last couple of days the entire Evergreen estate has been transformed from a working plantation to something quite resembling Cinderella's ball. At least the musicians were "done on the cheap." Being so close to N'Orleans we're spoilt for choice where they're

concerned. "The event of the year," is what Papa keeps saying, presumably to make me pleased. What he doesn't know is that dark hole's beginning to sound ever more enticing.

"I can't wait for this all to be over." My heart pounds harder than it's ever pounded before, and most certainly not in a good way. I feel sick, but maybe that's to be expected.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine, Miss Jos'phine." Polly, who I'd asked to be my maid of honor, now approaches holding the strange white veil that came included with the dress. "You really meant to wear this, Miss Jos'phine?"

I exhale, barely even caring. "Sure, I guess." If it succeeds in concealing my hurt, I'll wear it gladly. I fail to see its use but she places it in position over my head regardless, herself wearing a pretty yellow frock with flower-prints that showcases her hips and buttocks in a way that almost helps me to understand precisely why my husband-to-be has been paying her nightly visits, though I guess I'm hardly one to talk on that score. Maybe this union is doomed to be an unhappy one.

"Good luck today, Miss Jos'phine," her words emanate a great relief I can almost feel, relief that tomorrow morning I'll be leaving for Washington with the man who's been abusing her. Last night I'd watched from my window as the glowing lantern again hovered across the lawn, the two familiar silhouettes just barely visible over the distance. I guess once we're gone that only leaves Papa to use her however he sees fit. Suddenly, Polly's hand is on my wrist, "and good luck for whatever comes after."

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The trills from a half dozen fiddles accompany the light steps I make over the lawn between two very long files of mostly strangers, all dressed in a range of outlandish styles and grinning, from what I can just barely make out. The veil conceals much of my surroundings, which I decide is probably for the best because should I happen to see Leon's face at any point then I can't guarantee I'll manage to get through this ceremony.

Papa puckers his lips in the way he often does when he's trying to hold himself together, his body rigid from concentration. With the crack of his elbow, he squeezes my arm and I just manage to return the gesture without stumbling. The truth is I'm not certain I

can make it all the way to the altar without his support, even though he put me here in the first place and, oh, there's Henry coming into focus now, dressed most dapper in an all-white outfit of breeches, shirt, cravat and hat. *It might not be so bad, Josie, you'll just have to make the best of it, after all, it's for the good of the South.* Besides, it's not like I'm the first girl to wed a man she barely knows, barely cares for, and I'm far from likely to be the last.

I begin to wobble just as the fiddle playing falls silent but with the help of Papa, I manage to coordinate my final few steps as I close on the reverend, Henry, and another man who was last night very briefly introduced as Congressman Carlton, with slim facial features beneath a powdered wig and who's Henry's best man. Now, he gives me the kind of leering stare the veil could only hope to conceal until, that is, he notices Polly position herself at my side, from when his top lip curls slyly up to reveal tobacco-stained teeth.

When I turn to face Henry, his expression's characteristically stern in a way that's impossible to read and then, as Papa slips his hand out from my elbow, I realize how truly alone I am now, alone but for this stranger who may or may not become dear to me.

Then mostly in a wisping haze, words are spoken, rings are exchanged, and like a piece of property, I'm given away by my papa to Congressman Henry Harper of Virginia. I hear the sounds but they don't sink in, I see the people, the altar, the man before me, but mostly through a white gauze-filled blur, and I feel almost nothing as my body has lost most of its perception, which is why it's a surprise when Henry throws back my veil, snapping me to, and brings his face closer to mine.

For the first time our mouths connect. His mustache feels strange, almost chafing, and his lips are so thin that I wonder if he's kissing me properly, with the kind of lust and longing that I've become accustomed, and the smell of vanilla essence is so intense that I might easily have been at the perfume store.

Last but by no means least, the reverend concludes with the words, "I now pronounce you man and wife," and hundreds of people cheer.

"You look so beautiful, my dear, and what a wonderful idea going for an all-white dress."

“Just like Queen Victoria...”

“An all-white dress...”

“Yes, just like Queen Victoria.”

“Not very traditional but, I suppose, the young these days... Wherever did you get the idea, my child?”

“Mother, for the third time, it was Queen Victoria who came up with the idea.”

“Who?”

The younger lady, who’s evidently the daughter, rolls her eyes for my benefit. “You must be getting bored of this conversation by now, Missus Harper.”

I politely wave her concern away because at this moment, listening to sweet old ladies talk is far from my primary cause of anxiety, indeed she’s quite a pleasurable diversion. “Oh, it’s fine, really.” In truth, I’m more preoccupied with the name the daughter just called me, as it’s the first time I’ve been addressed by my new, I suppose, title. I exhale and assume I should probably remain conversing for a few more minutes before moving onto the next group because, I guess, now I have to keep up my end, for the South. “Ladies, are you enjoying the...”

From somewhere behind there’s an almighty ruckus, no doubt several of the congressmen, again, as they’re proving to be a rowdy bunch, two of them having already fallen into the fish pond after another somehow managed to break the arm off the statue of Papa’s grandpa. He won’t be happy about that when he realizes. I shake my head, wanting only to ignore it, but it’s impossible to ignore a fully naked Congressman Carlton as he takes a running leap from atop the balcony before landing plum in the hedge to loud cheers and backslaps, his wig separating from his bald head before coming to settle over a teapot where the slavers’ wives are seated. Henry’s the first to pull the imbecile out the hedge and now a large group of our esteemed representatives embrace, throw wine at each other and sing Pretty Polly at the top of their voices.

My Lord, but it’s still early. By the end of this night the wine being dispensed by Leon and the rest of his “nigger flat foots who can’t dance” will no doubt have an awful lot to answer for.

I consider going over to take a glass for myself, as I fear I’ll be in need of it come time for bed, but I can’t quite bring myself to go through with it. There are around four hundred pairs of eyes all on me, constantly, so why chance it when the merest overheard wrong

word or misconstrued gaze might cause a scandal. I'm paranoid, perhaps, but I imagine paranoid people are better at keeping secrets, and ours is one secret that must never be known.

I return to engaging in nervous small talk with people I've never met, thanking them for making the journey, some of whom have come from as far away as Wilmington, and all the while I can only make mental notes about my new husband's absence and ask why he'd rather get drunk with his friends than accompany me for this task. Well, his absence suits me fine, I just hope he isn't starting the way he means to go on.

Inevitably, it's not long before I make my way around to Major Titus Turner, who's the only man standing amidst a few dozen tables, his burly arms folded as though he's guarding this section of the wedding. I glance cautiously about the vicinity for his two sons, Joshua and Jacob, who came with him putting poor Hiram out of a job, and I spot them both seated nearby, their expressions remarkably joyless similar to their father's.

"I hope the food and wine are to your liking, major?"

"Never touch the stuff," he says without moving his head, or his lips either for that matter, which is quite extraordinary, but then most of his mouth is concealed beneath the most impressive mustache you've ever seen and what projects out beyond either side of his face by a good half-foot at least. Not dissimilar to a rolling pin, it's no doubt kept stiff and in place only by the copious amount of tar employed, and which has turned the whole thing black, contrasting sharply against his white hair. He'd come to my wedding attired in his old military uniform, which is about the most imposing green thing I've ever seen, but then he's spent each of the three days since his arrival wearing the same.

His first day he'd made an impression. When yields were below what he deemed satisfactory, he'd chosen ten slaves at random, taken each to the drinking barrel, and held their heads beneath the waterline until they passed out, only to repeat the process once more after they'd regained consciousness. For the next two days, yields were back-to-back Evergreen records.

"His methods might be a little different to what we're used to," Papa had said after I'd complained, "but he gets results and that's the most important thing. Some of the Northern states are squeezing us with their tariffs, so we're having to lower prices in order to compete, which means that if we don't produce more sugar

we're in trouble." He'd tipped back another glass of bourbon and the broken capillaries in his face began to flare. "You can bet the British producing the stuff from their Caribbean islands aren't having to contend with sabotage, their own government working against them, and last but by no means least, lazy slaves, especially not when they have engines working for free." He'd shaken me by the shoulders. "Surely you can see what we're up against, so won't you stop bleating on about it ... or perhaps you want Oliver back, is that it?"

He'd got me there, and then he went on to speculate whether it was the impending wedding that, in a fit of jealous insanity, had driven the former overseer away. Something had certainly made him mad.

"Proposing every five minutes, like some lovestruck teenager," Papa had shaken his head with particular disgust, "really. Well, we won't be having that kind of trouble with the major, no, as straight as they come, he is, won't even touch the sauce," he'd barked, "the man won't even pay the female slaves a visit to..." he'd stopped very suddenly, and for the first time I knew of what he was referring but kept it to myself, and no doubt now he was regretting drinking so much and getting so emotional, "anyway, the man's happily married, so you'll no longer be getting bothered by overseers who've forgotten their place." His two sons, however, were another matter entirely.

Now, as I struggle to make conversation with this dour and difficult major, I'm being ogled by the two younger men in the kind of unsettling way in which I've become accustomed. Wearing a wedding dress, it appears, makes no difference whatsoever.

"Oh, of course, major, my papa mentioned you don't drink, erm, how about a tea or coffee then?"

"No."

I suck in air. "Surely you might be tempted by the lemon drizzle cake? I baked it myself."

Mercifully, a large band of fiddles and brass instruments strike up and men commence tugging their ladies onto the lawn to dance. More follow and soon enough the grass is crammed with happy dancing couples. I seize the opportunity to escape and through the jostle, I spot Henry tipping back another glass of wine before commencing to roughhouse with a man who's removed his boots and breeches. My eyes blur over and when I turn away towards the



nearest marquee, I spot Leon watching me attentively.

*Just go over to him, Josie, if you gave a damn for convention and what people think then you would never have allowed him to enter you in the first place, I tell myself. I want to, I truly do, and never has he looked so sumptuous in black breeches, suit, and red bowtie, almost painfully so. Even now, married that you are, Josie, he still makes you weak, feel hopeless, terrified, and yet alive...*

My feet begin to move but they stop when a local rancher arrives first to take a glass of wine from the tray Leon's holding. I breathe deeply, the moment gone, and then a second later...

"Missus Harper, please allow me to introduce you to Mister Benoit, a cotton planter from Hattiesburg."

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As evening approaches the guests gradually transfer to the ballroom, which is when finally I have to walk past Leon now standing just inside the doors. By this point, I'm so fed up that I'm keen to throw caution to the wind, though it's not like there are many sober guests left anyway. Besides, the music's loud and the size and shape of the room, as well as the high ceilings, serve to make every last note count enough that I'm barely worried about being overheard, though it's not like I'm about to declare my undying love for Leon, or anything, or else suggest we might find an unoccupied broom closet to go at it just once more for old times' sake, as much as I'd love nothing more.

"You look like you're having about as much fun as I am," I edge a tiny bit nearer, just enough for the two of us to notice, and remain standing there, close, just to be in his company, doing nothing.

"Dispensing wine still beats dancing." His voice is hard to read, not quite his usual tonality, and I can't quite tell if he welcomes my presence or not.

Right," I croak, and oddly, I find myself inhaling the air around him, savoring the scent. "Did you bathe?"

He nods. "They made us wash." The incredible memories of the two of us bathing in the stream flood my mind.

"Where'd you get the suit?"

"Some man from N'Orleans come with several. For us niggers serving. It needed stretching. My mummah do it for me but I still scared to bend my elbows." He's definitely struggling with this

conversation, his voice is deeper than ever and his posture's all hunched. However, by far the greatest giveaway as to his pain is his eyes, the window through to his soul, and right now they're telling me so much. The poor thing is tormented. "Would you like some wine?" *He wants me to go.*

"Thank you," I rasp with a quivering hand as I take a glass.

"You're welcome, Missus Harper." His words compel my eyes to clamp shut, forcing the tears to remain in their ducts, but another second is all I can take before I'm stomping away, breathing deeply, and desiring only a gust of cool air. No, actually, I'd rather have a dark room all to myself and an hour to cry. No, scratch that, I want only to escape this place with the clothes on my back and the man I love, and I would gladly forsake all security, all money and material possessions for the realization of such an impossible dream.

Suddenly, a hundred guests are clapping, feet are stomping, and a large circle slowly emerges and spreads to cover the greater part of the ballroom floor. The music changes and the boards begin to shudder as Henry's dance troupe shuffles into two long lines. When the fiddles hit the right cue the main event commences and then almost a hundred of our slaves are twirling, twisting, circling and turning with impressive coordination.

The respite is most serendipitous as it means I have something else to concentrate on besides the rest of my life, so I focus on my breathing, averting my eyes from everybody, even though I can sense so many still watching me, and trying not to cry as the ballroom, the dancers, the whole world starts to spin so fast around me that I almost begin to feel sick. I glance at the wine in my hand and find the glass still full.

Cornelius and Dorothy circle close by me, snapping me out from the bliss that is obliviousness, from when I'm forced to concentrate on the show, to smile, to pretend all's well in my world. They've done good, all of them, as it's a fine spectacle. Entertaining. Admirably synchronized. And I've never seen so many of our slaves smiling so broadly. Henry, especially, deserves credit for the choreography, I have to admit, as I'm fully aware of the effort he's put into it. From around the back of the large circle, the man himself now slowly makes his way in my direction, his gaze, surprisingly, is turned away from his creation and is locked firmly on me.

"Damned not bad, not bad at all." The dance or myself? He

places his arm around my back and I can't help but notice how cool it feels, cold even, despite the early fall Louisiana heat. *Leon's hand, indeed, his entire body, was always so hot.* "Even young Barney's proving quite the danseur, as you Frenchies put it." The next thing I know his lips are on my ear. "No more torturing me with that virgin cunt you've been shaking around in front of my face these past few days, sweet dear," the words come as a groan, the stench of wine mixed with tobacco heavy on his breath, "a couple more hours, no more than that, and I fully intend on breaking you in." His hand crawls down my back and squeezes my buttocks in a way that forces me to flinch, "maybe I'll put a little Harper inside of you as early as tonight," his clutch intensifies and then his fingers are slipping between my cheeks in a way that's quite painful, and it's a great effort on my part, stoic almost, to save from squealing out in discomfort. The next thing I know he's pulling away and declaring, "aah, Congressman Daniels, I see you brought the cheroots."

My skin burning, I twist away from the dance to find Leon dominating the floor space from only a few paces away, his dark eyes shining with the early formation of tears as wine shivers over the sides of several glasses. *He saw it all.* Oh, if only he could have been spared that. Quickly, I compose myself, force a smile, and shake my head for his benefit. *I'll be alright, now don't you worry about me.*

The dance finishes to loud cheers and shouts of "bravo" aimed mostly at the grinning choreographer who bows before waving around in acknowledgment his glowing cheroot. The slaves are directed out to the drawing-room where they've each been promised a slice of my famous lemon drizzle cake and an early night, as well as a sleep-in tomorrow. Then the floor opens up to the guests as various tables around the edges become occupied by those in no mind to dance, the wine continues to flow as sounds of chatter, of laughter, of pattering feet, the trills of fiddles, the buzzes of trumpets, and the waves of this new instrument that's becoming popular, the saxophone, overwhelm all else. I'm not sure how much time passes, though I do know I have to yell every attempted conversation with local businessmen whilst doing my best to eat something, after all, the deviled eggs and catfish look luxurious, and I know that Papa has spent an incredible amount of money on this great feast, but for obvious reasons my appetite's lacking.

A finger taps my shoulder and I glance up to find Henry's best

man, Congressman Carlton, grinning down from above. "Missus Harper..." he holds out his hand for mine, I acquiesce, and then his lips are pressing against my knuckles.

"I'm glad to see you've found your breeches, sir, who knew our politicians could be so..." I consider the word carefully, "energetic."

"If you think *us* boisterous, Missus Harper, you should spend an evening with a troop of Whigs." His sinister eyes pierce into my own and again he leans down to slather his lips upon my knuckles. "My word, but didn't young Henry do well for himself. Knew the man at Yale but the less said about that the better." He guffaws profoundly, causing an avalanche of white powder from his wig to sprinkle over his shoulders from where the black cloth of his restored and pristinely cut jacket now possesses a fine white coating. "I would have conversed more with you yesterday evening but the wife..." he brings his cheroot towards his lips, which clasp around the tip, and then the end flares red as he inhales deeply before blowing out a large plume of acrid black smoke, "she gets jealous at the slightest female interaction."

"I can't imagine why..."

"I was rather hoping to take a plunge into the slave pen," he continues, evidently not having heard my retort, "see what your old man's got, but after the trip the damned woman was so restless it wasn't worth risking." He snaps his fingers and makes a gesture for someone to approach, and to my consternation, it's Leon who makes his way over, tray in hand, "oh, God, where'd you find this one, anyway, I won't make the same mistake twice. Tonight I've got the bitch suitably tanked up, you see, so it's off to bed early for her. That's if she even makes it that far."

It's quite lucky I've been laying off the wine tonight, else I might have been liable to...

"I was earlier ogling a couple of your finer looking fillies strutting around dancing but unfortunately I wasn't the only one so it looks like tonight I'll be competing with the rest of the lads. I just hope I'm not too late snagging a nice thick one, the darker the better, generally, but I'm not too picky either way, so almost any will do, and I don't mind sharing or going second either, and I reckon I can pretty much say the same for the rest of these reprobates," he waves a gesturing cheroot, presumably to indicate his Democratic colleagues, some of whom are close enough to overhear this diatribe and for whatever reason are taking an

interest in the congressman's monologue while all I can do is sit in stunned silence, wondering why he's even telling me this, "your husband excepted, of course, Missus Harper." He winks at his colleagues, which precedes a loud outburst of group laughter.

"Congressman Carl..." I begin but stop as Leon arrives.

"Yes, massa."

"More wine, you daft gorilla," the congressman plucks two glasses from the tray, downs one and returns it before twisting back to me with the kind of glance Oliver used to give whenever I would wear my yellow or red skirts. "My word but Harps will be busy tonight, the lucky bastard, say, perhaps when it's done you might confirm whether the rumors about him are true?" That's rather ominous.

My head snaps back and there's nothing I can do to prevent my eyes from meeting Leon's from over this obnoxious congressman's narrow powder-dusted shoulders. "Rumors, what rumors?"

The congressman's about to answer but he instead turns back to address Leon. "You still here? Why don't you go and feed this tray to my wife? Be gone with you, you throwback to a bygone era. No, on second thoughts, wait," he downs the wine he was still holding and switches the empty glass for another full one, "now go, you walking dysgenic, leave me."

I slam my hand down into the table, the intention being to register my protest at his vulgarity, but by chance the present piece of music comes to an end and then a few hundred people are clapping and stamping their boots so the gesture's completely drowned out, leaving me red-faced and infuriated.

Leon stoops to collect the empty glasses from the table and in so doing, casually brings his head close to mine. "It's ok, Missus Harper, no need to affront on my account."

I inhale him deeply to be overtaken momentarily by the kind of shiver only my true love could bestow upon me, but then, all too cruelly soon, he's standing and smoothly backing away without anyone having noticed the painfully inadequate exchange that meant so much, leaving me awfully wanting.

"Hold up," comes the order from a voice I know. Henry, as it turns out, is one of the watching congressman, because of course he is. I twist around in my seat as an ominous bead of sweat rolls down my back.

"Henry, what's..."

“You there...” Henry says directly to Leon, furrowing his eyebrows in a similar way to last night. “Haven’t I seen you someplace?”

There it is, and my heart shoots into my mouth because despite this being Henry’s wedding day, there’s nothing that would make him quite so happy as catching his assailant. In a flash, I’m glaring at my lover and praying for a Hail Mary, for something that might...

“Yes, massa, we speak last night, massa.”

Henry takes a step closer as my hand clutches around a table knife. “You’re the ditch digger, no?”

Leon shakes his head. “No, sir, it be a cesspit.”

I understand immediately that despite the alcohol, my husband’s lawyer’s brain is quick to set in, attempting to trip Leon. There’s no doubting whose mind of the two is sharper, at least normally, and right now I’m absolutely terrified this exchange must only lead to an appalling outcome.

“Cesspit, that was it.” He brings the cheroot to his lips, draws back deeply and then blows a cloud of filthy black smoke into Leon’s face. “Perhaps you wouldn’t mind showing me this, um, cesspit?”

Without hesitating, Leon bluffs, “course, massa.”

My husband’s lips pucker in acknowledgment, though whether it’s owing to an expression of gratitude for acceptance of the invitation, or from being skillfully bluffed, I can’t tell. What I do know is that Henry’s studying Leon’s face intently, even more so than he was last night.

There is a cesspit, of course, located some distance behind the house, but even if Leon was able to locate it immediately, in the dark and under pressure, it’s not freshly dug and Henry would never fall for it. An old, overflowing cesspit on its own is not evidence of anything, least of all an assault in a darkened stable, but discovery of the lie would certainly lead to more questions. Why was Leon lying? Where was he really when everybody else was rehearsing? Irrespective of the answers, Papa would soon become involved and then it wouldn’t be long until even he realized there’s no mortgage for a slave who goes by the name Leon, so where did he come from? How come such a conspicuous slave wasn’t noticed before? And, oh, hey, now that I’m paying attention, isn’t this the same darkie who Josie was clinging to, whilst making a total show

of herself, at the auction house? Papa would go to the cabins to talk to some of the others, not all of whom can be relied upon to remain loyal to their brethren, and it only takes one to reveal, in exchange for certain privileges, that it was only recently that Leon had arrived out of thin air. Finally, even if he wasn't to be turned over to Henry and his rope, it wouldn't be long before he was revealed as an escaped slave, which would only mean an identical outcome regardless.

I find myself clutching ever harder to the table knife but I thrust it down suddenly, inspired, and come to a stand. "Henry," I casually pat down my dress as though all is well with the world, "I do believe we've not yet shared our first dance. It would be a shame to waste the occasion and I do believe our guests are expecting it, so why don't we..."

"All in due course, my dear." Henry stubs his cheroot out on Leon's tray and then brings his hands up to adjust his rival's red bowtie. "My word, but I don't believe I've ever seen a nigger looking so smart."

Leon remains rigid, at least bodily, though there's no telling what's going on inside of him, to be so close to his adversary, a man who's just married the woman he loves and who tomorrow will take her away from him, forever, to be taunted, almost certainly in the hope of being provoked. My lover's jaw clenches. "Yes, massa."

But why would Henry wish to provoke Leon? Somehow, for whatever reason, Henry suspects Leon was the one responsible for the incident in the stable. He could go out right now with a pistol and some of his boys to locate the cesspit, though I suspect Henry knows he's far too drunk for such an exertion, so his dimwitted contingency, thought up on the spot, is instead to see if the server's quick to anger or docile like a typical slave who'd never raise a finger, to incite Leon into striking him because in Henry's world, such a happening would prove his suspicions correct and be considered evidence enough that he'd caught his man. Surely I'm wrong about this, at least I truly hope I am, I mean, the very notion is ridiculous, but the only other explanation is that Henry's picking on Leon for no reason at all.

"A big nigger like you," my husband persists, still playing with Leon's bowtie, "how'd you like to get to work digging *another* cesspit? Huh? After the wedding, I mean." He lets go of the bowtie and pinches Leon's cheek. "I've always found you can never have

quite enough cesspits. What with all the shit I've been hearing around here, they fill rather quickly, don't you agree?"

"Henry," I call out, my hands unknowingly clutching large clusters of wedding dress.

"Yes, massa."

Henry's lips purse in frustration because Leon has sense enough not to take the bait, at least up until this point. Henry pinches harder whilst several of his friends, Congressman Carlton included, jostle closer for prime position of the awful, humiliating spectacle, their expressions all but goading Henry on, to escalate. "I'm watching you. Believe me, you big dumb nigger, I'm watching you very closely indeed." He tugs out Leon's cheek and between his thumb and forefinger, he mockingly jiggles it around. "You hear that, everybody?" Henry moves his ear closer to Leon's cheek and concentrates on the sound he's making. "This nigger might not be able to dance but he can certainly sing." Several of his friends chuckle heartily at that and even though Leon's entire body is now trembling, mercifully he still fails to give Henry the satisfaction of reacting. Finally, Henry lets go, though not before giving him a light, playful yet patronizing, slap on the side of the face.

"Henry," I have to call out above the noise, "might we finally take that dance?" I'm jostling to get closer myself now as he ignores my appeal.

"What was it you used to strike me with?" Henry absolutely asks Leon before several witnesses. "Won't you answer?" When there's no response, Henry takes the last remaining full glass of wine from the tray, reaches up to raise it above Leon and then slowly pours it over his head.

My mouth falls open as the music stops suddenly and then hundreds of attendees are gaping in stunned silence as wine continues to drizzle down Leon's burning face.

When finally the glass is empty, Henry casually returns it to the tray and waves apologetically to the assembly. "Sorry, my mistake, had an accident with some wine, that's all." It's only murmurs that penetrate the silence, Henry seems not to care at all, and again he leans close to Leon's ear, only this time the other side so I'm forced to quickly reposition so that I can read his lips as he whispers, "I know it was you."

I don't know what to do. I mean, I want to seize Leon and drag him away, perhaps to that dark room where we can be alone



together, to console each other, but I can't, no, because that's the last thing I can do now, as a few hundred people bear witness to this dreadful drink-fueled altercation. Various gasps break through the silence, sniggers, enquiring words, laughs, the odd jibe, even a mumbled encouragement by Congressman Carlton for Leon to dare retaliate, just for the laughs, and which would be certain death for him.

I'm squeezing my wrist as tightly as I can, my nails digging into flesh. *Please, Leon, don't give him what he wants. Don't give him his 'proof.'*

The tray in Leon's hand quivers as the empty glasses rattle against the steel. I can see how hard this is for Leon, who on at least two occasions has already proven he's willing to stand up for himself, even against rich and powerful white men. For Leon, I know, by far the worst of this will be the humiliation he's suffering in front of me, and right now I can only imagine my presence is making it incredibly hard for him to grit his teeth and not strike my bastard of a husband, which quite honestly is what he deserves.

Leon's lips mash together as his body continues to tremble, his eyes occasionally flicking onto me, humiliated in front of the woman I've no doubt he loves, as I love him, and I pray that he can breathe, count to ten, think of something else, anything else, heck, think of *me*, right now, my creamy white thighs spread wide as he sinks slowly, deliciously, inside, the beautiful love we made during that very brief, yet incredible time we enjoyed together.

And then, mercifully, the moment passes, the music restarts, people turn away and Henry throws up a surrendering arm because anything he thought he knew about Leon having struck him in the stable must obviously be his imagination. He shakes his head, Leon already forgotten, and then he turns to face me. "I think I'll say goodnight, boys, for I do believe it's time to consummate this arrangement." He grabs my wrist and before I can do anything we're moving.

It happens in slow motion, at least for me, as a mask descends upon Leon's dark features and almost like he's lost control of his body, his senses and autonomy, he's dropping the tray to the floorboards, taking a step closer, reaching out for Henry's neck, and it's only because I'm expecting this reaction that I'm ready for it, and the look on my face is all it takes to save Leon's life, thank the Lord, the pain, the pleading, as well as the warning that

undoubtedly is all too stark in my eyes, and then Leon's backing away, and that same pain is staring right back at me...

As I'm led to Henry's bedroom.

## Chapter 17

Joséphine

**H**is room smells strongly of vanilla.

Behind me, the door clicks loudly into its frame and when I spin around he's leaning back against it, hand on his chin as he studies me.

"Undress," he commands. No ceremony, no build-up, not even a kiss.

It's not supposed to be this way, but then, what do I know. Maybe all my books were wrong, they were certainly concealing the truth from me for all these years, of the act itself, of how babies are made. Maybe Leon and I were wrong too, the way we did things, that there was genuine affection between us, that we enjoyed being together, perhaps even that we loved each other. Maybe Leon and I were wrong in that we should never have been together at all. I ... I just don't know anything anymore, other than that now I must undress for this man, my husband, and carry out my new wifely duties, or else have them carried out unto me.

"Um, I will need help." I turn around, exposing the notches and buttons at the back of my dress. Perhaps when he sees my flesh he'll be different, though I doubt it, and I doubt too that I'll feel anything for him even then, if ever. In front, his clothes are laid out neatly into piles ready for tomorrow's long journey. I have much packing still to do myself, nearly all of it, in fact. I don't want to go but I must.

"Never mind, you can keep it on," comes his voice, strangely lacking in any feeling, or maybe it's my imagination. Something rustles and then a white cravat flies past to land on the dressing

chair, with two thumps his boots follow, and a moment later I'm being bent double and am only saved from stooping hard forwards by the presence of the bed, my hands instinctively throwing out for support.

I glance back over my shoulder to find him slowly tugging his belt out from the loops of his breeches.

"Don't look!" He demands, so I turn back, and then there's the appalling sound of wind splitting apart, prompting me to again glance back at Henry, wide-eyed with pending fear.

"Henry?"

His top lip curls upwards, revealing teeth below a twitching blond mustache that droops down both sides of his face. "I said *don't look*." He slashes the belt once more through the air and I can't say for sure that I don't hear a tortured groan seeping out from him. "Je ne regrette rien," he says mockingly and laughs, *I regret nothing*.

The next thing I know is a blinding pain cutting across my buttocks, almost pitching me forwards, but there's no time to rest, no time to question what in the Lord's name my husband is doing, as a second seething cut slashes into me, and then a third, a fourth, fifth, sixth, on and on they persist as my screams do nothing and his laughs, his heavy breaths and frustrated whimpers just barely permeate my consciousness. I've never felt pain like it, indeed, not once my entire life has Papa ever struck me, not in any way, but now, this man, and for no reason...

"Ugh," Henry allows his breeches to drop to the floor and then his shadow falls over me as his hands clutch my hips, "ugh...ugh...fuck...yeah...ugh...ugh...I've got you now...ugh..."

My upper body flops forwards as he holds me up by the hips. Is he inside of me? Or has the heat scorching through my flesh numbed all sensation of him, as he uses my body for his pleasure.

It doesn't last long, which is the surprising thing, and even when it's over I'm still questioning whether or not he was even inside of me. We collapse on separate sides of the bed and within seconds his snores are reverberating from the rafters. I remain, silent, for hours, until downstairs the music and the laughs and the joy finally come to an end.

For longer, I wait...

Until finally, in pain and still wearing my blood-soaked wedding dress, I clamber out, open the door and sneak away to find Leon.

## Chapter 18

Joséphine

I don't know whether this is a good idea, not when there are human shapes, silhouettes and figures still moving around in the dark, beneath the trees, around the path, the pond, outhouses, as well as voices, of individuals and even groups as they shamble drunkenly around the plantation, especially not when I'm all too conspicuous in my flowing white dress, stained with red as it is now.

Maybe I just don't care anymore and I'm throwing caution to the same breeze that now lifts my hair as I run, sobbing, across the lawn.

I'm not heading for the cabin where Leon will be sleeping. No. That would be too dangerous, so at least there's still some sense left in my weary head, dangerous because there's little doubting certain individuals, full of lust and with an opportunity, will also be there, coming and going as they please, to see what livestock's on offer, to be used. Indeed, even now I have to swerve away from at least one couple copulating on a bench, and then another against the trunk of a maple tree.

No, this moment, all I want is to be in our special place, our little love nest where I spent the happiest moments of my life, to fall asleep on our smelly, itchy pile of hay, to be there, to feel its comfort just one final time, alone as I will have to be.

I enter the barn and close the doors, shutting out what little power the moon has this night, and there's only silence save for the pattering of my feet as I cross the boards for the only thing that can bring solace to my heart.

*The smell...*

Even now, how can his intoxicating scent overwhelm all else? Is it so powerful that being here is all it takes for the wonderful memories to stir...

The lamp ignites, extended at the end of a long, black arm and my legs immediately buckle from under me.

Still wearing his shirt and bowtie, Leon's quick to find a hook before dashing over, catching me, and enveloping my body in his strong arms as I wilt into them. In an instant, his lips are crushing against mine as his organ immediately grows thick and strong against my hip.

"You came," I sigh, unsure whether this is real or a dream both perfect and cruel in equal measure.

"I come, my butterfly, how could I not..." his dark eyes bulge as he notices the blood that's all too evident on my wedding gown and now, in the small light produced by the whale fat, I can see how much of it there is, the crimson color that's dried to a crust, how badly Henry has hurt me. Leon's entire body begins to shake and I'm not even sure he knows he's ripping my dress as his fist closes around a large clump. Then something else rips and the cotton around his biceps tears away, revealing the dark musculature beneath the inadequate shirt that conceals him. For the first time ever, Leon's scaring me and were he to attempt something stupid, I can't be sure of being able to stop him. "I kill him!" The awful words confirm my fears and then he's stalking away, long, purposeful strides, dragging me towards the doors as I feebly attempt to haul him back by the arm.

"No! Leon, don't! You mustn't!" My feet are futilely attempting to dig in, to stop him, slow him, even, but it's useless, as my heels slide closer and closer to the exit. "Leon..."

"He hurt you. Now I kill him," his voice, it barely even sounds like my love anymore, and never have I been so desperate to stop him, this crazy madness, to make him think for just a second.

"No!" I yell, "it will be the death of you," of course, I know that Leon would gladly sacrifice himself for me and not think anything of it, so my words hold no power over him at a time like this, but I know what *will* work. "Leon, if you go then I'm going too, which means they'll all see us together and then that will be the end of me as well, of my reputation, and any life I might be expected to have." The irony is that even as I speak the words, I know I don't care

about any of those things, and would gladly trade in the lot to be with *this* man, but I know also that Leon feels different because the truth is that absolutely nothing has changed. We're still in Louisiana. Regardless of the bullshit, however, mercifully, my words stop him from leaving this barn and stomping towards a certain death. Thank the Lord.

"Butterfly?" His nostrils flare from so much air being expelled from his lungs. "Tell me, what would you have me do?" He turns around on me suddenly and again I'm fearful of what he might be capable. "And don't say nothing."

The answer's so easy. I grab his hand and place it over my beating heart. "We've been granted one final night on earth together, my wedding night..." *it should have been Leon*, "and now I want to consummate it properly."

"Cause this be tha last we ever see each otha."

The tears are streaming down my face now. "Right."

The lamp flickers, casting two contrasting shadows against the wall, and the next thing I know I'm being scooped up and carried towards the straw. I'm quick to throw my arms around my lover's neck but it's only a second before I'm being lowered to the ground. I waste no time spreading my knees, straddling him, as my white dress tumbles either side of his body. My fingers make quick work of his shirt buttons although it's an inconvenience tugging his arms out the damned sleeves, and neither do we care when it rips further, and then I'm casting it away whilst rising on my knees so that he can hastily tug down his breeches.

Neither of us attempts to remove my wedding dress because, I don't know, but maybe out there, somewhere, in another world, *this* is my real wedding night, and it just feels that by leaving it on we're making some kind of a statement to the universe. His hands do, however, slip beneath my dress to tug down my undergarments, a movement that sends a delightful shiver up my spine, and almost as though my life depends on it, I'm leaning forwards to allow him space to position himself at my entrance, all whilst I heave deep breaths into his ear and my body braces to receive him.

He finds the spot, forcing a hot blast from my mouth, and I'm so aroused, having missed Leon so much, that I'm ready and wanting, no, needing him, instantly. I waste no more time and sink slowly back, impaling myself on his manhood, my lips slowly parting with a delicious agony, my nails digging into his biceps, as I place more

of my weight down upon him, as he persists pushing ever further inside of me, stretching me, filling me completely. When I don't think he can possibly sink any deeper, I spread my knees just a little bit wider, applying more weight upon him, and then I'm being speared by those final few pleasurable inches that make all the difference in the world.

We exhale profoundly together and then meet our tongues in hot passion, all else remaining fast, just living the sensation of being fully connected. I don't even have to move before the first climax is overtaking me and my walls clamp tighter around the thick shaft that ought never leave. When it passes I start slow, rising and lowering carefully, wanting this to last forever, but if I can't have that then the rest of this night will have to suffice. I close my eyes and focus on all the sensations, wanting to experience this with my mind and soul as well as my body, the throbbing, stinging, stretching, thrumming, as well as the smells, texture of his flesh, and his deep, rhythmical breaths.

It's not long before I realize I'm crying, *this truly is the final time*, and there's nothing I can do to prevent the madness, as I move my mouth beside his ear and croak, "Leon, I love you." I know we promised never to say it but if I don't say it now then I never will.

His fingertips pulse against my hips. "I love you too, my butterfly." To hear it, just this one time, from his lips ... it will have to be enough for me, for us.

At some point, it starts raining from when the barn's battered hard from all sides. The lamplight flickers from the breeze that seeps in through the various holes and cracks in the structure, and it's not long before several leaks are spewing inside from the same. It's all part of this night, whatever happens, happens, and may the Lord remain with us.

His hands reach up to caress my breasts, completely devouring their pertness, and my nipples react as expected, by flushing with blood, hardening, becoming more sensitive. I lean forwards, bringing my globes towards his lips, and he wastes no time, feasting upon them in earnest, big, thick lips, his tongue lavishing the points with various pressures until my body is overtaken by a second blinding climax that both boils and freezes my blood. Only when I'm recovered do I redouble my efforts, increasing my speed, and it's not long at all before I feel him twitching inside of me, like he's attempting to suppress the buildup of his seed that's tantalizingly



close to spilling. His fingers sink harder into my flesh, his breathing intensifies, and only when he's nearing the edge do I stop altogether and return my lips to his.

"Ugh," he pants between kisses, "what are you doing to me?"

I place all my weight down upon him, fully impaling myself with his considerable size. "I don't ever want this night to end."

"Nor me, Butterfly."

Several more times I bring him to the precipice, and each time the intervals are shorter, as it becomes harder and harder to stop myself, to pause just long enough to bring him back down again. The wind and rain continue to batter our refuge as our lovemaking persists throughout the night. It almost seems unfair, that I lose count of how many times Leon makes my entire body explode in a cacophony of blazing stars, each one more intense and wrung out than the last, but persist I must, because as soon as it's over, then...

At one point he lifts me off, turns me over and ravages me from behind, his thighs pressing into me with love and care so that my wounds are not agitated, as his strong arms hold my buttocks in situ. When again I explode I force my knuckles into my mouth to save from screaming so loud we'd attract unwanted attention, but then, just when Leon's about to release, again he holds back.

My legs wrap around his back as he pins me to the pillar, in and out he thrusts, holding all my weight as though I were nothing at all and still, my big, black lover holds back his release.

The rain stops and eventually, from somewhere not too far away, a rooster crows its morning song. By this point, we'd taken back to the straw, though he's on top of me as my ankles lock around his buttocks. Leon's seized by a great shiver as once again his manhood pulses, my walls clutching around him like a hand inside a well-fitted glove. "Butterfly, I don't think I can hold off anymore, I...I'm not strong enough..." he transfers his bodyweight to his elbows and I know at once what he's about to do, that he's going to leave me, so I'm quick to secure my grip around his back with my legs as I use my arms to pull him in tighter by the neck. Oh, I know it's not much, and that he could so easily pull away if he chose, it's just...

I want to receive him, just this once.

"Ugh, Butterfly, I..."

"Shhh," I hiss into his ear, "it's ok..."

"Wh...what?"

“Please, stay with me.”

The widening of his eyes is just barely visible in the small light.  
“B...but...”

“I know, I know,” and I know too that we spoke about this, that the potential implications could be catastrophic, but I love Leon, so how can the prospect of his baby growing inside of me ever be wrong? Besides, once it’s done it’s over to the Lord to decide what should become of Leon’s seed, and even if nothing should come of it, I still want that little piece of him to remain inside of me forever.  
“Please, Leon, let me feel you...”

For several painful seconds, he fails to react, as his organ continues to twitch inside of me, but then finally he responds, and he so does with the most wonderful of words. “Ugh, ok, my butterfly...” his eyes roll up in his head as I bite my lip in anticipation and then, removing the weight from his elbows, he transfers himself back onto me as the perspiration upon his flesh builds, his grunts become louder and the speed, depth and power of his thrusts increase.

My body’s so eager to accept Leon’s gift that my own climax, yet another, grows in tandem with his. He’s still powering into me with ever increasing force and rapidity, perhaps to forever transform my body, until finally all his muscles clench and I’m quick to use all the strength in my possession to draw him into me true, as close as humanly possible, tugging at him with both my legs and arms, my fingers digging into his buttocks, as he too grabs ahold of the support pillar to wrench himself as hard into me as he’s able ... and stops!

Indeed, the whole world seems to stop.

And then I feel it, just as my body undergoes its orgasmic throes, the first rope of Leon’s creamy white seed is gushing inside of me, and then a second follows right after, this one even larger, hotter, thicker and stickier. Unable to hold in my screams, I can only let myself go entirely as jet after jet persists to fill my every last remaining nook, to splash against my reproductive organs, and still the essence spills from him, each stream preceded by a distinct quivering of his manhood as it carries his offering from his body into mine, as my own climax works to tug his nectar ever further inside of me, and only after Leon’s fully spent do we both come down from when we can only lay, together, in bliss, because what else is there to do...

When finally the sun rises we stand, dress in silence, and then embrace by the barn's opened doors. It's a beautiful day, the stream still flows its crystal clear waters and an immense ocean of sugarcane still sways gently with the breeze. Maybe nothing's changed or maybe everything has.

It's up to the Lord now.

I watch as Leon pushes through the crop, heading for his cabin before the major rouses the slaves. I wait ten minutes before setting off for the house.

## Chapter 19

Henry

**T**he wretched daylight forces my eyes open.

Head aches.

Stings.

Troubling myself, I stretch for my timepiece upon the bedside table. Just gone eight. Well, yesterday was my wedding day, so my tardiness might be excused. Not that there's anyone who needs answering to.

Wedding?

Ah, yes, that's right, and I can vaguely recall finally giving it to Broussard's daughter, the lovely Joséphine, and now my wife. I turn around and find the girl lying there, facing away, and still togged in that awful white gown.

A pleasant little sigh escapes her, causing a twitch down below.

Not left me for breakfast? Huh, well, they do get attached, women, and there's nothing quite like finally plucking a maiden's flower to make her addicted.

I lean into the crevice of her neck, inhale profoundly, and feel an even greater stirring of my loins. Damned girl smells like the fields. Musky. Best wait until after she's bathed before taking her again. Oh, no, wait, today's the day we start for Washington. I sigh and pinch at my eyes. A long day's travel is just what I need with a rancid hangover, the first of six or seven. So much for a honeymoon but with a little luck I'll accommodate a carriage in New Orleans with curtains and space enough to take a tumble on the seats.

I slip out of bed and move around to the foot. Standing over her, I watch for several minutes whilst she continues to hum. Clutching

the blanket's edge beneath her delicate jawline, she maintains a handsome aspect even when asleep, her button nose just barely moving as she breathes, flickering eyelids lost in some pleasant dream of her gallant husband, and long blonde locks of the most feminine perfection. If I haven't put a Harper in her already then I hazard it won't be long before I do.

I grab the blanket that overhangs the bed and wrench it away, rousing my lovely wife with a start.

She springs to a sitting position, her deep blue eyes glaring at me with hilarious hostility. "Henry, what was that for?"

My gaze is seized by the blood, so much of it, contrasting sharply against the white, and I nod with approval. I don't recall much of last night but I must have broken her in pretty good. "Breakfast, my dear. Long day ahead. Plus you stink like the slave coop and need to wash."

"What?" A sharp breath of air is forced into her lungs as her eyes widen yet further, but only for a flash, and then she's looking away covering her mouth as she yawns.

I shake my head and grab ahold of the bedsheet beneath her. "It's a joke, sort of, you *do* need to wash." And with that I wrench the sheet away, sending her tumbling to the floor.

"Henry!"

There's nothing I can do to hold in the laughter, so I let it out raucously. "What is the custom around these parts?" I hold up the sheet to inspect the blood but it looks like there's much of it caked all over her ghastly gown also. If she's any sense she'll toss the eyesore.

From her squatting position, she demands, "custom? What are you talking about?"

"I took your maidenhood, the marriage is consummated, so now we must display the evidence from the window."

"What century do you live in, Henry?" She maintains her bemused expression as she scrambles to her feet.

I shove open the window, unfurl the sheet outside and close the frame on a corner. The girl's expression is priceless. It's going to be fun spending the rest of my life making her so infuriatingly mad. All the better for the bedroom, I've always found.

After bathing and dressing, we break our fasts on ham, eggs, bacon, toast and coffee, a wonderful goodbye spread prepared by Polly. Now, the serving wench attends in silence from the corner.

That's one negress whose fat buttocks I'll miss thrashing but I'm a married man now, so it's time to step up and put all that shit behind me. Soon enough I'll have a family, and if the wife turns out to be half as difficult as her old man then I'll have a job on as it is, and that's not forgetting the run I intend on making for the presidency, as though I didn't already have enough on my plate.

*No, Henry, it's time to get serious*, because those stirrings from certain malcontents, particularly in the North, are getting ever louder. It was only three days ago my correspondence made mention of yet more illegal tariffing of Southern cotton. Other reports speak of our wagons getting turned away crossing state lines and there's more that talk of fanatics seizing and destroying transports containing Southern goods produced by slaves. The Northerners like to constantly complain about how they can't compete with our prices, even though the response is staring them right in the face. The South remains competitive, just, because of slave labor, so rather than follow suit, they whinge, complain, and now this new one, threaten all-out civil war.

The presidency! Soon as I'm in that position, I'll put an end to all this talk, alright, and safeguard our way of life, which reminds me, because pretty soon I'll have to start sowing the seeds of doubt in Josie's little head by demonstrating my own gradual change of heart with regards these issues, which will be a test. If I can't make my own wife see the light then what chance will I have a whole country? Probably best I wait until after giving her a good ravaging, when she'll be all lovey-dovey and clingy, and start by citing the undeniable science with regards nigger inferiority. The presidency of the United States! I bark, suddenly, startling my wife. Easier said than done, unfortunately.

Chewing on my bacon, I glance out the window and can only shake my head at the sight of several of my Democrat colleagues sprawled out and still asleep on the fucking lawn. These are the people I'll be relying on to put me in the White House. Suddenly, my breakfast tastes off, so I push the plate away and call for Polly to go fetch one of the bigger niggers to load the wagon because the sooner we can get off then the sooner I can begin work on strengthening my faction.

She seems keen to rush away and five minutes later she's back with that Leon giant who missed all the rehearsals. I vaguely recall attempting to rile him at the wedding, for whatever reason, for all I

remember he probably looked at me funny, but when drunk I do tend to get confrontational, or so I've been told.

"Yes, massa?" Right away, there's an odd petulance to the big nigger's tone and I don't like the way he just looked at my wife, almost like how a wolf eyes a lamb. Oh, he wishes, for sure, he wishes he knew what it was like to experience such pale and slender thighs wrapped around him, if only for the one time, but he never will. I tell you, but if this dark race ever achieves freedom, Lord help us, then the chip they'll possess, the envy and resentment they'll hold towards us will be all-consuming.

I point through to the other room where there's a mountain of luggage in crates and boxes stacked against the wall, more wedding gifts than we could ever hope to unwrap. "I want that lot carrying out to the wagon. Make sure your boy Harris brings Conrad around to the front and load up from there, else your trips will be ten times as long and we don't got all the time in the world. I want to be away within the hour, you got that? If it won't all fit in the one wagon then tether up another, one of Turner's boys will show you how it's done, if it's too much of an ask, now, there are multiple objects of a queer shape, such as my new grandfather clock, which was a wedding gift from the governor of Georgia, so make damned well sure you secure it true, along with everything else, or any damage will be taken out on your back. There are also multiple items of value so if anything goes missing, I'll know the first place to look." I wave a hand to shoo him away. "And please don't traipse mud, leaves or any other filth back into the house with you."

He delays just long enough for it to become noticeable and only blunders towards the colossal baggage heap after I give him a second, more hostile glare. He doesn't answer with a 'yes, massa,' in their usual mumbling way but I decide to let it go because, quite frankly, impudent niggers are the very last concern occupying my mind right now. But my Lord, the size of those boots he's wearing, almost like shovels.

I turn back to my wife, who's looking unusually flushed in the morning humidity, which is one thing I definitely won't be sad to leave behind. "Are you quite alright?"

She nods.

I grab her hand and lean closer into her neck. "Well then, I was thinking that at some point along the journey I might give you a real reason to..."

It almost feels like the entire house is shaking in its foundations, as the nigger tramps over the boards carrying a heavy box on each of his shoulders, obliterating the moment of tenderness I was sharing with my woman.

My fist clenches but I suppress the urge to yell at the caveman in front of Josie. "We'll try make Mobile tonight, where I have a planter friend who'll accommodate us gladly. Aye, it's not the perfect way to begin married life, so just think of Washington and my townhouse, as well as the emperor four-poster that's awaiting our ret..." my attention's seized by the sight of the genius in the other room attempting to wrench out one of the boxes from the bottom of the stack. "You there!" I stand suddenly and raise my voice. "You can't seriously be that stupid! Start from the top. The top!" I can only shake my head with incredulity and roll my eyes for my wife's benefit, although the look's not returned.

The nigger twists around and stands arms akimbo, almost defiantly. "I lift all them." There's that crabby tone again and quite frankly I'm beginning to get irritated by it.

I stride across and have to tilt back considerably to meet his gaze. "When you address a white man, you say 'yes sir,' or 'master.' Being gracious, I'll even accept, 'yessir,' or 'yes, massa,' because I know how you niggers are, but you will not talk back or show disrespect to me in front of my wife, do you understand m..." I'm taken very suddenly by a memory, a wisp of recognition that throws my mind into a limbo "d...do you understand..."

Josie dashes over from the table. "It's alright, Leon, please, I know you can handle all this and more, so don't mind my husband."

That makes my head snap back, and the way she tilts her head when she looks at him, it's almost disturbing and...

*I'm enshrouded in darkness until my eyes readjust to the gloom ... silence ... save for the whimpers of a negress bent over a dividing wall ... a horse...*

The deep bass of his voice brings me back. "I got them, Miss Joséphine." Next thing I know the slave's heading out with a heavy stack four boxes high, his muscular back filling his shirt leading to shoulders twice the width of his waist.

I blink away the fog, wrap my hand around Josie's arm and squeeze. "You dare to undermine me in Washington, my sweet dear, and I'll confine you to the house for a year." I apply more pressure,



just enough so that she understands I'm not joking. "Do I make myself clear?"

She nods, "yes, I'm s...I'm sorry."

"Good," I let go and allow the smile of a minute earlier to return, "Mobile, as I was saying, there's a guesthouse out on the bay, luxurious, with large stone pillars, a balcony and the most beautiful rose garden you'll ever see. We'll aim to overnight there where Mister Moore, my cotton planter friend, promises a lavish reception and..." movement outside the window prompts my head to swivel, "oh, good Lord."

"Henry, what now?" Josie turns to look too and when she does I can't swear that I don't hear the faintest of sighs slipping from her throat.

Because Leroy, or whatever it is he's called, is only pulling the damned wagon himself, which has to weigh an absolute tonne. Impressive, oh, sure, but hardly efficient, so this can only be an attempt to provoke me, to intentionally delay our departure, not to mention make a mockery of my instructions.

I storm outside, my arms batting at the air of their own volition. "You there," I yell as Josie's feet patter close behind, "didn't I tell you to rouse your boy, Harris!" I barely even finish the words before the young stable nigger enters my periphery not far behind, leading Conrad by the reins. My face clenches up because I realize I've been rash but it's too late now, I'm committed, and must therefore continue with this line rather than lose face in front of my wife. I'm certainly not apologizing.

The big nigger drops the tongue so that the wagon hits the turf with a noticeable clap, almost obnoxiously so, and then he straightens to his full, considerable height. "I get him. He there!" If I'd thought his tone petulant before, now it's outright truculent. "Maybe you should *look* before you yell," he absolutely declares, and no less in front of my watching wife.

My head snaps back so hard that I'll be amazed if my neck doesn't suffer a hyperextension injury. By God, but this will not do, no, this will not do at all, and almost like some other-worldly force has taken control of my legs, they're carrying me towards the upstart just as Conrad emerges from behind the far side of the wagon led by Harris...

*Conrad ... his tail slaps at a fly ... the sweet stench of manure ... so strong ... pungent ... my crop ... I bring it down across plump black*

*buttocks ... multiple times ... I'm aroused ... so very aroused ... I drop my breeches...*

"Henry," it's Josie's voice that brings me to and my eyes regain focus, "Leon has carried out your instructions to the letter. Conrad was just getting shod but he's here now, as is the wagon, all thanks to Leon, so perhaps you might say sorry?"

My neck's definitely about to suffer a hyperextension injury. "Ex...excuse me?" I have to blink away the insolence as I face my wife. "What did you just say?" I step closer and prepare for her answer.

She sighs, glances at the nigger with an odd kind of look I can't explain, and says, "I think Leon deserves an apology."

What was it Broussard once told me? "*Josie's a spirited one, true, but a wife can be disciplined same as any nigger. If she gives you trouble, don't spare the rod.*" Funny, but at the time I hadn't taken the old man for much of a disciplinarian, indeed I still don't, and although the advice was sound, perhaps if over the years he'd taken his own counsel then instances like this would never have come about.

Losing all control over myself, I snatch the riding crop straight out from Harris's grasp, stomp back across to my wife, seizing her by the arm and spinning her around, and with a red veil falling over my vision, I'm drawing back my arm and thrashing her across the backside.

She lets out an almighty cry and is only spared from falling over owing to the wagon being in situ for support.

I'm not done yet, not by a long way, but the moment my hand draws back for a second strike, something catches my wrist. In an instant, my whole world is given over to the most intense pain I've ever felt when my arm is wrenched backwards suddenly, dislocating my shoulder as the crop wilts to the dirt. I'm spun bodily around and have only time to let out a single high-pitched shriek before two giant black hands are wrapping around my neck. Down to my knees, I'm forced, and then I'm glaring wide-eyed up into the deranged face of...

*I'm aroused ... so very aroused ... I drop my breeches ... give myself a quick tug as I prepare to enter the whimpering negress from behind but then ... a noise ... rustling ... I twist around and there's a black face coming at me ... plain as day ... I see him now!*

It's him!

By God, but I've got him!

"Leon!" It's Josie whose hands are around the monster's arm, trying in vain to pull him off. "Leon! Please, let go, you mustn't..."

As my eyes begin to blur out I can just barely discern his shape, far off in the distance, one of Turner's boys heeding the assault from atop his horse, shouting and waving a white kerchief for help ... so far away as to be futile.

"Leon, no..." is all I hear as I slip into unconsciousness.

## Chapter 20

Joséphine

Suddenly it's pandemonium, the pain in my own backside completely forgotten, even with the old wounds having opened again, as I struggle to pull Leon off Henry. "Please, you mustn't hurt him, or else..." it's futile, I know now, because he's already gone too far, and all in front of so many witnesses. Now, there can be no going back, I fear.

Harris has run into the house, Conrad's skittering nervously and either Jacob or Joshua is shouting from far up the dirt track leading into the crop. But all this I barely even take in as I continue trying to tug Leon off my husband, his fingers easily overlapping as he continues to apply terrible pressure around Henry's neck as he squeezes the life from him.

"Leon!" I'm thumping him now, his huge arms refusing to give. "Let go, you're choking him." This is the last thing I want, injury or worse, either to Henry or anybody else over me, but Leon's just not hearing it. To make matters even worse, there's a look in his eyes, a look I don't recognize, a look I've never seen on Leon or anyone else, and it's almost like he's been taken over by a demon spirit, making it all but impossible for him to see reason.

Henry's face turns blue as his eyes glare pleadingly up at me, his entire body limp.

"Leon, will you let go of him," I scream as loud as I can right before the sky's torn apart by a shattering crash. Startled, Leon finally releases Henry, who flops to the ground, and I've barely time to register Papa pacing down the steps, smoking shotgun in hands, before I'm reaching for my husband's motionless form, slapping at

his face, too shocked to think, to sob, to do anything much at all.

The cocking of Papa's shotgun just barely permeates. "Hold it right there, son," he demands, presumably of Leon.

The patters of multiple heavy hooves augment, grow louder, and then three horses are kicking up large clouds of dust that billow on the breeze.

Boots strike ground and I hear the creaking of leather and the rattling of more guns as my breathing's seized by palpitations. "I'll take it from here, Mister Broussard," it's Major Turner's voice, sounding calm and authoritative, almost like such an incident as this is completely routine for him.

Papa's arm slips around my back and he tries to bring me away from Henry but I mutter something indicating for him to leave us. His gentle tugs are insistent so I acquiesce and then I'm being aided back up the steps towards the house. It's the rubbing of rope and Leon's moaning protests that prompts us both to turn back from when we find the major pointing a shotgun at Leon from close range as his two sons lead the way towards the large maple tree on the lawn, rope in their hands and its noose around Leon's neck.

A breath of air is forced from me, despair, and something else I can't even begin to describe. Truth is I'm numb right now, completely, and I'm barely able to comprehend what's transpiring and even less able to do anything about it, even if I wanted to, and after what I think I just witnessed, I'm not even sure I want to intervene.

I just don't know, in fact, I'm not sure I know anything anymore more, or if I ever did.

The voices that come back on the breeze are muffled, um, shouts, curses, threats. The end of the rope is tossed over the largest limb projecting from the tree and the major stoops to retrieve it, the shotgun not once moving from its target, until he's joined for the heavy, brutal task by his two sons.

"Come, Josie, let's go inside." Papa's arm is insistent but my feet are rooted. No, I need to see this, and for whatever reason Papa doesn't argue, I guess, perhaps, because he understands that allowing me to see the death of the man responsible for, erm, doing what he did to my husband might be good for me, for closure down the road. I don't know. Maybe he's in as much of a daze as I am.

With a great effort, all three men haul Leon off the ground and his feet immediately commence thrashing uselessly back and forth

through the air as his black fingers, the same that had once brought such pleasure to me, attempt to gain purchase on the rope around his neck, futile as they prove owing to his weight, and slowly he begins to choke just as he choked Henry.

But it is too much to watch and my gaze immediately moves away from the awful spectacle and back to my husband. We were meant to be heading out for Washington today, the capital, to start our lives, but now instead I must see my former lover slowly hanged. The damned stupidity of it all, the futility, the complete waste, and for what?

At first, it's faint, owing to the distance and the breeze, but gradually, ever so slowly, the sound grows louder, the pattering of yet more hooves, what can only be several horses galloping, blended with urgent yells for more speed until the distinctive cracking of riding crops are also discernible.

"What's this?" Papa growls as we both face the low horizon and the canopy of trees that leads into the Evergreen estate. A cloud of dust and dirt swirls upwards and provides a backdrop to the ten horsemen now charging towards us. Papa's arm wilts from my back, a few seconds later they're through the canopy and slowing to a canter, the front rider vaguely familiar. His mount's hooves skid to a stop mere paces from the bottom of the steps.

Captain Book takes one look at Henry sprawled out on the ground, quickly motions with a finger for the next horseman to examine him, and then swings down from his saddle. As he begins stepping up the stone towards us, the other riders arrive, at least five of which shoot past the scene here and persist towards the tree where even now Leon's kicking legs are beginning to wane.

"Mister Broussard," Captain Book's voice is urgent and full of authority as he removes a sheet of paper from his leather hip pouch and presents it to Papa, "a matter of urgency, it would seem."

Among the throng below, Oliver's definitely the most recognizable of the newcomers, still wearing his usual hat as he stands in his stirrups, staring towards where the five patrolmen are now bickering with Major Turner and his sons. With Oliver is another man I vaguely recognize but at this point, I'm unable to recall from where, and I certainly can't put a name to him.

Papa's eyes scan the paper. "What is this?"

"Ma'am," Book acknowledges me briefly, "sir, we have word of an escaped slave being harbored on your property..." distracted by

what he's probably figured out to be his fugitive, no less presently hanging from a maple tree, the captain twists around and calls to the other newcomer, wearing a black top hat, and who's saddled beside Oliver, "Mister Boudreaux, is that him?"

"Yeah," the man I recall now from the auction house yells with urgency, "that's my property, the one choking to death on the end of a rope," he spits into the dirt, "take your time, Captain, but I'd be obliged if you wouldn't mind telling your boys to cut him the hell down."

Book is about to call out towards the tree but stops upon seeing it's no longer necessary because Leon is indeed now on the ground retching for air. He turns back to Papa instead. "Mister Broussard, you do realize Mister Boudreaux has every right to press charges?"

Poor Papa, who had nothing at all to do with any of this, shakes his head, disbelieving of the drama that's come to his plantation the morning after his daughter's wedding. "No..." he hisses, "no, I..."

Incredibly, there are numerous people on the lawn still sleeping off their hangovers, although several are now roused and watching the drama from their positions. Closer, and perhaps realizing he might just have inadvertently saved Leon's life, Oliver throws down his hat and begins tugging at his long black hair.

The matter of urgency attenuated, Book takes a moment to glance around his vicinity, to the seventy tables, four hundred chairs, an altar, bunting, uncountable breakages, vomit and at least one dead body. "Looks like I missed one heck of a party." He now concentrates his gaze back on my hapless Papa. "I take it my invite's in the post?"

Leon's being shoved towards Boudreaux, his hands tied behind his back as he heaves for breath. Rediscovering his usual dominance, Papa puffs out his chest. "That nigger, Captain, just murdered my son-in-law, I do believe such an offense supersedes any consideration with regards runaways, stowaways, or whatever it is you're accusing me of." He points a long finger at Leon. "I want that nigger hanged."

"We need a doctor," comes the shout from beside my husband, "quick, a doctor!"

"It ain't murder, Mister Broussard, if there ain't a dead body," Book declares before hastily descending the steps, "you might want to consult your lawyers."

A great blast of air is forced down my lungs and without

knowing it, my feet are carrying me back down the steps. "Henry? Henry?" The sight of him almost causes me to recoil, his skin's frighteningly white as he takes repeated short, sharp gasps for breath, but I'm immediately on my knees and grabbing his hand. "Henry, hang in there."

"Easy, ma'am," the man says, his hand behind Henry's neck as he holds it in position so that his airways are opened, "where's the doctor? Max," he fires a glance at one of the riders, "get your hide over to Cormier's. Now!"

Leon arrives, trudging his feet, but I can't even bring myself to look at him. Oliver's staring at me with a crazy look behind the eye, his left shoulder, even now, is hitched against his ear in what can only be permanent nerve damage caused by Leon. It's a miracle Henry's still alive, even though there's no telling for how much longer, and he's staring at me in a way that might almost make me believe he's seeing angels, which is the very last thing I am.

"Mister Smith," Boudreaux's voice now dominates as he relinquishes a leather pouch to Oliver, "looks like you did not waste my time, after all, so here's the two hundred dollars reward I promised." He now casts his gaze upon my former lover. "And you, Cumberland, what of you?" He shakes his head and the grin is beyond demonic. "First thing's first..." and with that, he slashes down with his riding crop across Leon's face. "Second; if this white gentleman dies, it's back to the maple tree for you. I dare say I'll make a tidy sum on the insurance." He removes his top hat and wipes the sweat from his brow, revealing fine strands of damp hair, "and if he survives," he returns the tile to his head and leans down from atop his horse, "then it's back to the fighting pits where you belong."



## Epilogue

Joséphine

Washington, D.C. - Six Months Later

I lay the six daguerreotypes out on the table and Henry spends the next ten minutes staring at them, which makes ten minutes plus two months.

“You still haven’t made up your mind?” I stand behind his chair and begin gently massaging his shoulders. “Well, take your time, but not too much, the deadline is finally upon us.”

It’s no easy choice, I have to concede, deciding between six Northerners for the Democratic Party nomination. There were only two men from the South on the entire original list of candidates, Senator Houston of Texas and my Hen. The senator had received more votes than expected yet still bowed out early, whereas my husband had received one vote in the first round and was persuaded to withdraw to save face.

“We feel for you, you know that,” Congressman Carlton had sympathized, “and it’s even admirable that you would still show up, but come on...” he’d flapped his hands at my husband sitting in his chair and hoped not to finish the rest of the sentence. In the end he didn’t, not that anything else needed to be said.

And neither do Henry and I discuss it. We both know. And we expect too that he’ll be kept around only to see through his maiden term in congress and after that they’ll primary him out of his position.

“The people of Virginia need their congressman to be...” Carlton had begun on another occasion before biting his tongue, “more

cake, Missus Harper?" That was the day after Henry's friend had taken over leadership of the pro-slavery faction within the Party, leaving Henry and myself out in the cold.

I shake away the unpleasant memory and, along with Henry, continue to stare blankly at the six daguerreotypes. Pierce, Murphy, Cass, Buchanan, Marcy, Douglas; one of these men will be our nominee, which almost certainly means he'll become the next president of the United States. One of the images really ought to have been my husband, but for...

Well, the obvious.

Because the incumbent, a Whig by the name Millard Fillmore of New York, is about the most unpopular president in our nation's history. In the South, we despise the man, the outright anti-slaver that he is. Any one of the remaining Democrat candidates would be better, though as Northerners to the man, how much can any of them be trusted to do right by us, really?

I point to the first daguerreotype. "How about Franklin Pierce, my love?" Being from New Hampshire, he's about as Northern as they come, in fact, he's so Northern as to be almost Canadian. He's pro-slavery, of course, but it's lukewarm support, so surely we can do better. I slide around to Henry's front and with his eyes he indicates in the negative. Oh, well, Pierce will be no loss to us, but then who else is there? "How about Murphy?"

There's a knock at the door.

"Enter," I call and smile at the butler who brings an envelope on a silver platter. I thank the man and then stare at it for a while. It's not from Congress, the Party, or anyone else in Washington, no, it's stamped with a mark from N'Orleans.

Nervous and unprepared for what the letter from my papa might say, I place it down upon the desk for after lunch.

"It's about the plantation, Hen, I just know it is." I dip the spoon into the soup and bring it to my husband's mouth. I try to remain strong for his benefit but it's not always easy. "Oh, I'm sorry, here let me wipe that," I dab the pea away using a kerchief, and when the soup is gone I push the lemon drizzle cake away from him and snarl, "how many times do I have to tell them, no fucking solids, which means no fucking cake, crème brûlée only."

His eyes flick upwards towards the ceiling, which means he needs the bathroom.

When finally that's taken care of, I settle down with the letter. It

is indeed from Papa, which forces a sigh from my body, and again I brace myself for yet another barrage of bad news.

*Dearest Daughter,*

*Well, daughter, it looks like your actions are about to impoverish us all. As you know, Boudreaux continues with his attempts to ruin me, the lawyers' fees alone are breaking my back, but then throw in the abysmal harvest, Major Turner leaving in disgust (owing to your actions, which by the way you still deny), and wagon after wagon of our crop being destroyed en route north then it will come as little surprise that I've had to put Evergreen on the market, and all for a steal.*

*Well, was it worth it, daughter? What you did? Tell me!*

*Oh, I know you still act all innocent whenever I put the question to you and you can continue to deny it all you want, but the fact remains, daughter, that the evidence I seek grows larger in your belly by the day. Three months from this letter reaching you, daughter, and we'll all know the truth of the matter, one way or another. It's your husband I feel sorry for, the way he's ended up, and all because of you. Tell me, daughter, does he still believe the nigger that grows inside of you is his? What will he do once it's born? Nothing, of course, because now he's a cripple who relies completely on you and now you'll spend the rest of your life having to wipe his ass. I ask again, was it worth it? What did that once fine man ever do to deserve any of this?*

*Being shunned from polite society is what you have to look forward to, daughter, because believe me, they won't tolerate a white woman with a nigger sucking at her teat, even in Washington. The grapevine also tells me that Henry's about to be primaried out from his position, not at the midterms in three years, as originally expected, but at this coming election, so it looks like things are about to get extremely rough for the both of you even sooner than we thought, and with his family's tobacco plantation suffering a similar fate to mine, it doesn't look like you can go begging for handouts there either.*

*You had it all, daughter, and you threw everything away, and for what?*

*I'll be alright though, just so you know, there's no need to worry about me. When the plantation's sold I'll use the proceeds to see through my retirement in a nice ranch on the coast somewhere, either Savannah or Charleston, haven't decided yet. Either way, don't bother coming to look for me.*

*Just one last thing, before I say goodbye forever - I've enclosed a recent article from the New Orleans Advocate. Enjoy.*

## *Adieu*

Completely numb, I unfold the article and immediately see the large sketch of Leon. The headline beneath states 'Notorious N'Orleans Pugilist Dies In Bout.'

The paper falls into my lap, my first thought being how little I feel.

Henry's been watching me and is expecting a summary of the letter. I can't let him see the image of Leon, so I screw up the article and toss it to the trash and then, gently caressing my swollen belly as I approach my husband, I prepare to break the appalling news.

## From the Author

Thanks for reading.

At this point I have no plans for any marketing material, Facebook fan pages or email newsletters. If you like my work and would like to be informed of any future releases then the best thing to do might be to subscribe to me via the 'Follow the Author' button on the Amazon sales page for this book.

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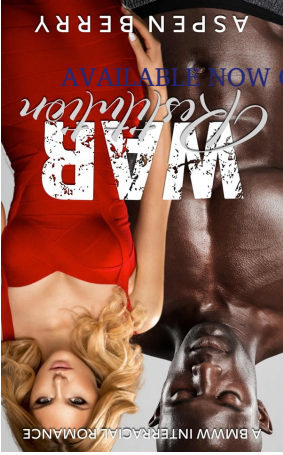
Thanks so much.

Aspen Berry

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